ON SET THE RINGS OF POWER S2

TOTAL FILM

M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN
HOLLYWOOD'S BOLDEST RISK-TAKER

SPEAK NO EVIL
JAMES McAVOY GETS NASTY

EXCLUSIVE!

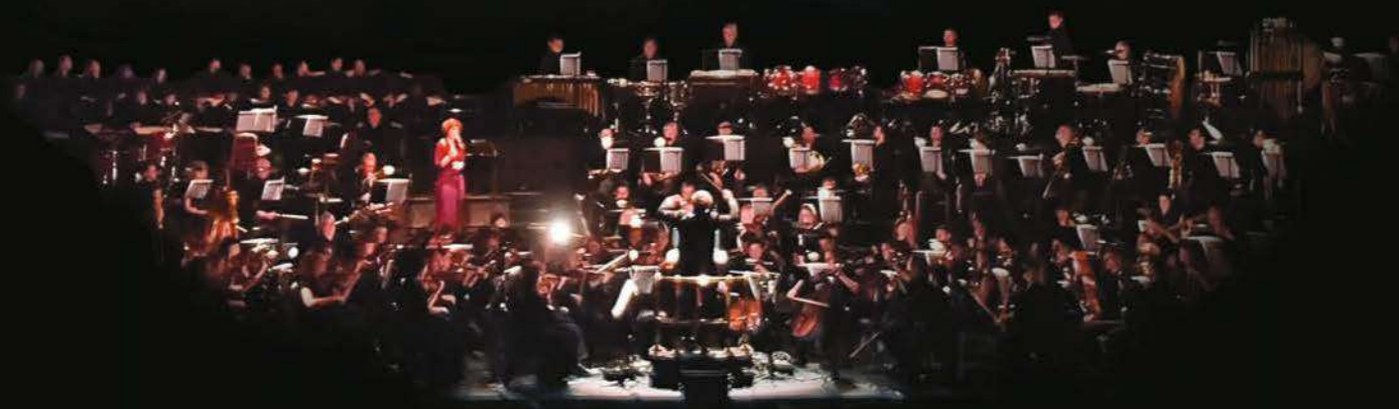
ALIEN ROMULUS

THE XENOMORPH RETURNS IN A GNARLY NEW CHAPTER THAT'S GOING BACK TO BLOODY BASICS

THE CROW
BLINK TWICE
MARVEL'S AGATHA ALL ALONG
TAIKA WAITITI'S TIME BANDITS

MATT SMITH
DEEP BLUE SEA AT 25
PHYSICAL MEDIA LIVES!
TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

FUTURE



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SUNDAY 27 OCTOBER

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Welcome to

TOTAL FILM

THE SMARTER MOVIE MAGAZINE

The interstellar terror of *Alien* is something that has haunted film fans for decades now. If, like me, you weren't even alive when it first debuted, you still keenly felt its threat. VHS box art, those whispered playground rumours about something bursting out of someone's chest, snatched glimpses of telly reruns and *that* all-timer tagline. Has any line more ominously set out its film's stall than 'In space no one can hear you scream'? Well, 'This time it's war' arguably comes close, with James Cameron's sequel beefing up the action.

So we're immensely excited for *Alien: Romulus*, director Fede Alvarez's new attempt to bring the franchise back to its dread-soaked roots. His new instalment is set between *Alien* and *Aliens*, and features a new cast and fresh dangers as well as the familiar thrills of practical effects, heart-in-throat scares and, of course, the xenomorph. Our resident Alien expert/honorary Colonial Marine Jordan Farley got the low-down from Alvarez and his cast for our epic cover feature.

And for more franchise expansion, in this issue we're also on set of *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* Season 2 for a look ahead at the battle for Middle-earth, and there are further twisted thrills with deep dives on the likes of *Speak No Evil* (James McAvoy's horror remake), *Blink Twice* (Zoë Kravitz's directorial debut) and *Starve Acre* (Matt Smith and Morfydd Clark's folk chiller). Plus, M. Night Shyamalan is reflecting on a career spent taking Hollywood by surprise. Excuse us if we scream with delight…

Enjoy the issue!

Matt

MATT MAYTUM, EDITOR
@MATTMAYTUM

CALL SHEET
THIS ISSUE'S EXTRAS

DEPUTY EDITOR
JORDAN FARLEY
@JORDANFARLEY

Curious what Fede Alvarez has been up to since his last film in 2018? For one thing, he built a 1:1 replica of Bilbo's Bag End house in his back garden for his kids, and *TF* has seen the pics.

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
LEILA LATIF
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The Crow director Rupert Sanders and I lamented that when we were younger and saw things from the 70s and 80s, we thought they were really cool, while nowadays Gen Z seem to think our millennial stuff is lame.

NEWS EDITOR
LAUREN MILES
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Interviewing Viggo Mortensen in person about *The Dead Don't Hurt* for the *Total Film* podcast was the highlight of my career so far. I was very restrained and asked no *Lord of the Rings* questions!

CONTRIBUTOR
JACK SHEPHERD
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During my *Rings of Power* S2 set visit, I accidentally bumped into Morfydd Clark in her Galadriel armour while on the way to an orc encampment. Talk about looking badass...

CONTRIBUTOR
KIM TAYLOR-FOSTER
@K_IMBOT

Does Zoë Kravitz have an update on *The Batman 2*? 'I wish I did!' she told me. 'I have zero information on where that's at. Matt Reeves has been writing... I'm eager and excited to see what he has in store.'

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
NEIL SMITH

I spoke to James McAvoy about *Speak No Evil* one day on from Scotland's crushing exit from the Euros. 'Oh, mate, that was devastating,' he sighed. Even over Zoom I could feel his pain.

Contents

#353 AUGUST 2024

THIS ISSUE

32 ALIEN: ROMULUS
Here's something to scream about: the scariest son of a bitch in movies is back. Fede Alvarez and his young-gun cast give us the fear.

44 THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER S2
On set across Middle-earth for the second season of Prime Video's lavish *Rings* series.

50 BLINK TWICE
Eyes wide open for Zoë Kravitz's incendiary directorial debut.

54 SPEAK NO EVIL
Blumhouse horror remake. You'll never hear *Eternal Flame* the same way again.

58 STARVE ACRE
Galadriel and Daemon Targaryen team up for a throwback folk horror.

62 PHYSICAL MEDIA
TF investigates physical media. You could say we've got disc-o fever.

EVERY ISSUE

3 EDITOR'S LETTER
Plus Team *Total Film*'s latest all-star anecdotes.

68 TOTAL FILM INTERVIEW
A full six-page chat with writer/director M. Night Shyamalan on his life, career and new movie *Trap*. Twist! It's actually eight pages!

112 DIALOGUE
This month's postbag: kids' flicks with horror titles, car-boot-sale discoveries, *IF* (again).

TEASERS

7 JACKPOT
Awkwafina's lotto winner is marked for death. Talk about bleeding cash.

11 THE UNION
Prepare to be shaken and stirred, by Halle Berry and Mark Wahlberg's blue-collar spy movie.

12 AGATHA ALL ALONG
WandaVision scene-stealer Agatha Harkness gets a witchin' spin-off.

18 THE CROW
Bill Skarsgård goths up for a fresh adap.

21 TIME BANDITS
Kiwi pals Taika Waititi and Jemaine Clement go on an eras tour.

22 KNEECAP
The fictional movie about the real Irish rap trio. We were confused, too.

26 BAD MONKEY
Vince Vaughn turns 'tec for a bananas crime-com.

31 MATT DILLON
The Outsiders star soon playing Brando.

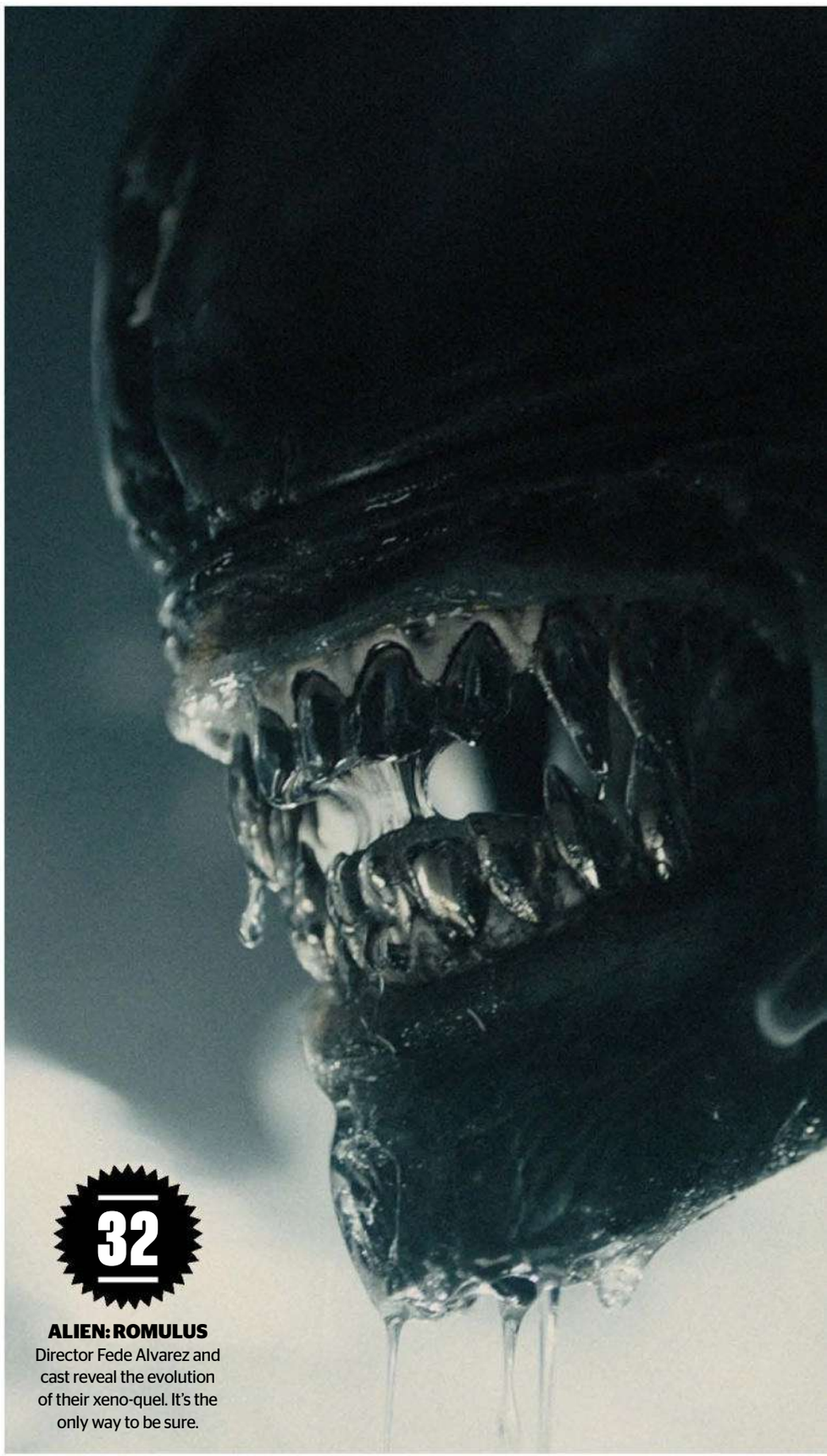
TOTAL FILM BUFF

99 10 OF THE BEST
Killer masks! We've got them all covered.

100 FLOP CULTURE
Why *Sunshine* failed to ignite at the box office.

102 DEEP BLUE SEA
How to mako sci-fi shark tale, with Renny Harlin.

106 DONALD SUTHERLAND
Paying tribute to the *Don't Look Now* legend.



32

ALIEN: ROMULUS
Director Fede Alvarez and cast reveal the evolution of their xeno-quel. It's the only way to be sure.

SCAN TO GET OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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7

44

‘WE REALLY WENT ABOVE AND BEYOND TO CREATE A WORLD THAT WAS EXCITING TO BE IN’

50

54

68

DISNEY/20TH CENTURY STUDIOS. PRIME VIDEO. WARNER BROS./ERIC CHARBONNEAU

SCREEN

78 FLY ME TO THE MOON
Johansson. Tatum. Lots of flirting. In other words, an A-list romcom.

80 LONGLEGS
Could this be the daddy of 2024 fright flicks?

80 I SAW THE TV GLOW
Justice Smith opens Pandora’s gogglebox.

81 THE MINISTRY OF UNGENTLEMANLY WARFARE
Guy Ritchie, Henry Cavill, Alan Ritchson, all at sea.

82 HUNDREDS OF BEAVERS
Throwback slapstick comedy that’s pretty dam(n) hilarious.

83 MAXXXINE
Is the sequel to *X*/*Pearl* cut from the same Goth?

84 DÌDI
Make (My)space in your life for this noughties-set coming-of-ager.

84 THELMA
Scam victim June Squibb is ready to explode.

85 SKYWALKERS: A LOVE STORY
Documentary risk-taking reaches new heights (not the high ground, Anakin).

86 BLUR: TO THE END
Reunion portrait that’ll likely leave fans happy for the rest of the day.

87 BEVERLY HILLS COP: AXEL F
Get the fourth outta here!

88 RERELEASES
From Cruise to *Caligula*.

92 TV
A time of Worf.

94 GAMES PREVIEW
Summer showcase news.

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN

URGENT APPEAL

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

We must act now.

Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material and emotional support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

Will you help us by donating?

With your help, we can avert a child protection crisis of epic proportions and ensure children are protected and kept in families. Never orphanages.

To help protect vulnerable children, donate online at: **www.hopeandhomes.org/donate**. Or call **01722 790 111** Monday – Friday 9am - 5pm.

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TEASERS

NUMBER'S UP

JACKPOT Awkwafina wins the lottery in Paul Feig's action-comedy. Now she just has to stay alive...

Winning $3.6 billion on the lottery is most people's idea of a dream come true. But what about a lottery where people can legally kill you to steal your prize money? That's the premise of breathless new action-comedy *Jackpot* from director Paul Feig.

'I got about 40 pages into reading this and I was like "I *have* to make this movie!"' Feig remembers of Rob Yescombe's script, which was initially titled *Grand Death Lotto*. 'I kept putting off reading it initially,' he laughs, saying he thought it sounded 'dumb' and 'really silly'. Yet once he read it properly, he couldn't put it down. 'It was exactly what I'd *always* wanted to do.'

Like Feig's other fan-favourite, *Spy*, starring Melissa McCarthy, at the heart of *Jackpot* are human characters who chime with audiences, despite the extraordinary situations they find themselves in. 'These movies must have a real emotional core to them to work,' Feig says. 'It's why I was so excited when I finally read the script. The reason *Spy* works is because you're rooting for this character who wants to have this life but doesn't think she's good at it. That's what I love about this one, too: it's somebody like one of us.'

Jackpot follows struggling actor Katie Kim (Awkwafina) who is suddenly thrust into the limelight when she wins LA's 'Grand Lottery'. The film is set in 2030 at a time where both the government and the public are desperate for money and the creation of the lotto generates billions thanks to its warped rules: kill the winner before sundown and their jackpot's yours.

'She finds herself down on her luck and then she just happens to be this lotto ticket holder who the entire city can murder,' Awkwafina laughs.

'When I first read the script, I thought it was different than just the usual, run-of-the-mill, 24-hour action comedies. The movie is unique and there's real heart in it, too.'

Central to the heart of the film is Katie's relationship with Noel (John Cena), an ex-mercenary who earns a living protecting jackpot winners from near certain death by fellow citizens – or, it turns out, protectors with more nefarious motives, like Simu Liu's brilliantly villainous Louis. Awkwafina says it was a dream come true to work with WWE legend Cena. 'John was so funny on set,' she chuckles. 'There were a couple of parts where John said some things where I completely lost it and then everyone lost it…'

Cena's Noel couldn't be further away from the macho male action leads of the 80s. 'John finds such a sweetness in the character,' says Feig. 'It could normally be a very macho, over-the-top, "I'm here to save you" role, but I just love what a big goofball he plays it as, and then Awkwafina is just so good at being caught in the middle of everything and yet being strong and finding her centre as the movie goes on.

'My favourite kind of action is [with] people who don't want to be in the fight,' Feig continues. 'I wouldn't do *Rambo* or that kind of thing because, to me, that isn't fun. The biggest thing you must figure out is not doing mayhem, which a lot of action movies do. Every stunt must be funny, entertaining, reveal something about the characters or break them open to admit other things as this action is going on.'

Feig looked to the work of a comedy-action legend for inspiration. 'I love Jackie Chan movies!' he gushes. 'The reason why his movies are so funny is because he's always in over his head and that's what I love about these two characters here.'

Awkwafina says that while Katie is initially a reluctant hero, her character is another step forward for women leading action movies in Hollywood. 'There's a lot of room in the various universes that we have in our industry to represent [women more] now… I like where we are in terms of female action leads: I think it's getting better.' Feig agrees: 'I always want to have a female lead character. Even though she was enlisting this guy to help her, they're kind of helping each other the whole time.'

Awkwafina enjoyed being front-and-centre for *Jackpot*'s thrilling action set pieces, guided by stunt co-ordinator James Young, who's worked with Marvel previously. 'We had the most amazing stunt team I've ever worked with,' she says. 'There were a lot of huge sequences…' Feig nods, saying he's proud that *Jackpot*'s biggest set pieces involved intricately choreographed fight scenes with hundreds of extras and no CGI. 'I want all the action and stunts to be in-camera,' he explains. 'When stunts finally start getting recognised awards, that should reflect what people actually did.'

Feig is 'extremely collaborative' on set according to Awkwafina, who points to a scene she filmed with Cena and musician Machine Gun Kelly, who cameos. 'There was actually a lot of riffing on all our parts in that scene and MGK was so funny,' she recalls, highlighting that improvisation created some of the film's funniest lines. Feig thrives on this approach: 'Everyone I put in the movie – people with one line all the way up to the big stars – are accomplished comedy people,' he says. 'They're going to come up with stuff in the moment and I'd be insane to cut that off.'

And yet for all the laughs and breathless action on display, *Jackpot* also seeks to work as a poignant allegory about human behaviour. 'It's about saying we can't get so focused on the end results that we end up hurting people by doing it,' says Feig. 'And this was the most fun, non-preachy way to say that!'

ELIZABETH AUBREY

JACKPOT IS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 15 AUGUST.

Lottery winner Katie with gun-for-hire Noel

'My favourite kind of action is with people who don't want to be in the fight'
PAUL FEIG

Will Katie and Noel escape with their lives?

Paul Feig with actors John Cena and Simu Liu

PRIME VIDEO/ DANIEL MCFADDEN

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Can Katie stay alive and claim the cash?

Fortunately for Katie, Noel is a strapping lad

HOT RIGHT NOW

JENNIFER LAWRENCE HAS A SLATE TO DIE FOR...

While Rian Johnson's star-studded *Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery* has hogged much of the casting news these last few months, it's now the turn of a new murder-mystery movie, *The Wives*, to be the talk of Hollywood, with Oscar-winner Jennifer Lawrence signing on the dotted.

A co-production between Apple Original Films and A24, *The Wives* has been scribbled by the sharp quills of Michael Breslin and Patrick Foley (*Ratatouille: The TikTok Musical*) and is reportedly inspired by reality TV franchise The Real Housewives, which follows the eventful lives of fabulously wealthy women across America. No news yet if Lawrence will be playing the detective intent on solving murder most foul, or one of the glamorous social butterflies who so often sting like wasps. What is certain is that Lawrence, who in 2018 started production company Excellent Cadaver, will also be producing this R-rated comedy.

'It was funnier because I was involved!' said Lawrence of producing her previous R-rated romcom, 2023's *No Hard Feelings*, and she was only half-joking. Asked to describe how it is to head up Excellent Cadaver, she stressed, 'It's busy but focused and streamlined. I don't take on anything that I can't read every draft of and give notes on.'

The Wives is further evidence that the Hunger Games actor, whose movies have made more than $6bn at the worldwide box office, is back, back, back after taking a break. '[I intend] to take in every second and be present and enjoy,' said Lawrence after celebrating, with husband Cooke Maroney, the arrival of son Cy in February 2022. Fans might have worried but she's now amassed quite the slate: Gary Ross' remake of heavyweight 50s classic *East of Eden*; Luca Guadagnino's drama *Burial Rites*, about a woman awaiting execution after being charged with murder; Paolo Sorrentino's biopic of Hollywood super-agent Sue Mengers, titled, simply enough, *Sue*; and Lynne Ramsay's horror-tinged tale of a mother struggling with psychosis, *Die, My Love*. Add *The Wives* to that tasty line-up and it's clear that Lawrence is as hot as she's ever been. You might say she's killing it.

JAMIE GRAHAM

THE WIVES, EAST OF EDEN, BURIAL RITES, SUE AND DIE, MY LOVE ARE ALL TBA.

MATIAS INDJIC/FIGAROPHOTO/CAMERA PRESS

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EXCLUSIVE

Halle Berry and Mark Wahlberg play elite blue-collar special agents Roxanne and Mike

STRIKE TEAM

THE UNION Halle Berry drags Mark Wahlberg into a world of action and espionage...

Gathering together a stellar cast, including A-listers like Halle Berry, Mark Wahlberg and J.K. Simmons, action thriller *The Union* takes all the familiar tropes of the spy movie and adds a new, unique aspect. Where typical cinematic secret agents don tuxedos and drink martinis, the agents of *The Union* are ordinary, working-class folk. 'It's championing the blue-collar,' director Julian Farino (*The Oranges*, *Entourage*) says of what drew him to the project. 'There's a J.K. Simmons line in it: "blue-collar not blue blood". That appealed to me a lot. It's very much the opposite of superheroes – the greatness of ordinary people.'

An ordinary person is certainly put to the test when construction worker Mike (Wahlberg) is approached by his old high-school girlfriend Roxanne (Berry), who has an important job for him. Little does he know he's about to be roped into the world of espionage for a top-secret US intelligence mission.

Farino explains that the relationship between Mike and Roxanne is at the core of the film: 'Even though it's a big, splashy, multi-location action movie, it feels rooted.' The director adds that *The Union* is character-driven even where the action scenes are concerned. 'I see a lot of action which, frankly, I'm indifferent to because it's just tonnes of explosions and stunt men and cuts. I thought with this, because of the story, we could do something where the characters and the action are interrelated. I didn't want to do anything that you couldn't feel that Mark and Halle were actually a part of.'

'It's very much the opposite of superheroes'
JULIAN FARINO

J.K. Simmons stars as team leader Tom Brennan

Luckily, Berry was very keen to get her hands dirty, as Farino brings up her practical approach to her work: 'Halle absolutely loves doing the action,' he says. 'She's so physically capable; she could work with a stunt coordinator for 10 minutes and learn the moves of a set piece or a fight.' And set pieces there certainly are – ones that take place all over the world, as the director describes shutting down London's Fitzrovia and taking over a seaside village in Slovenia for the movie's climax. 'We really shut down that entire town, which I never thought you could do!'

Without revealing spoilers, *The Union* ends in a way that's very open to further adventures. When *Teasers* raises the prospect of a sequel, Farino's response is modest – 'People have to like it first!' Nonetheless, he remains optimistic. 'I'm hopeful for that, because it's an original concept, which I think is great in a day and age where we lean a lot on remakes, and IP and franchises. I was astonished at the incredible physicality of Mark and Halle, so we better make one while they're still fighting fit!' **LAUREN MILES**

THE UNION STREAMS ON NETFLIX FROM 16 AUGUST.

NETFLIX

EXCLUSIVE

WITCHES' BROUHAHA

AGATHA ALL ALONG Kathryn Hahn's Marvel witch brews a magic mix of comedy, pathos and a good old-fashioned time

The task: create a spin-off from one of the most inventive and popular of all of the Marvel Disney+ series. Exactly how do you up the ante after *WandaVision*? 'Right out of the gate with the question that haunts me at night. Good job,' *Agatha All Along* creator Jac Schaeffer sighs, appropriately teasingly, over Zoom with *Teasers*. 'That was the question for me for a long time.'

Schaeffer reminded herself that Kathryn Hahn's tricksy witch Agatha is meant to be at the centre. 'This is Agatha's story. So my focus eventually shifted from how do we top *WandaVision* to how do we service this character? She's so extraordinary, multifaceted, complex, dazzling, campy and enormous. I found that if I just leaned into her, and both the comedy and the drama of her, and the spectacle of her, I didn't need to worry as much [about] crafting something similar to *WandaVision* – it became its own thing.'

Agatha All Along takes place after the events of *WandaVision*. In the show, Wanda's (Elizabeth Olsen) Westview neighbour Agnes eventually reveals herself to be Agatha Harkness, a witch who has infiltrated Wanda's Hex (created in her grief from a desire for a safe, idyllic home for herself and Paul Bettany's resurrected Vision) in order to discover the source of Wanda's immense power. After an epic battle, Wanda consigns Agatha to remain in Westview as Agnes.

'Agatha has been left without any of her power,' explains Schaeffer. 'Wanda absconded with [black magic grimoire] the Darkhold and left Agatha essentially imprisoned. So, at the top of the show, we watch her find her way out of that and then set off on a quest to regain her power. We will be returning to Westview, which is

'Agatha sets off on a quest to regain her power'
JAC SCHAEFFER

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Preparing for a brand-new adventure

exciting. And then, we'll also be going on a brand-new adventure that's specific to Agatha.'

She's on the road, then. The Witches' Road? It will be familiar to comic-book fans as a plane accessible only to sorcerers. Schaeffer won't reveal locations, and is tight-lipped about returning characters. *Heartstopper*'s Joe Locke will appear as a teenage member of a coven – referred to as 'Teen' – said to be a familiar (and who may or may not be Wanda's son, Billy). He forms a 'reluctant partnership' with Agatha, says Schaeffer, 'which is specifically entertaining because Agatha doesn't want to partner with anybody. Watching them spar and banter is a good old-fashioned time.'

Patti Lupone plays witch Lilia Calderu ('She's magnetic in the show and hilarious and so beautiful') alongside actor and comedian Sasheer Zamata as sorceress Jennifer Kale. Aubrey Plaza (*Parks and Recreation, The White Lotus*) is another exciting addition, reported to be playing an original character created for the series. Says Schaeffer, 'It was a pleasure to work with Aubrey because she's so funny and such a live wire, and she's so unpredictable in the best way. All of that is thrilling and funny, but also she's so interested in going as deep as she possibly can in any scenario, even if it's comedic.'

With Harkness seeking redemption, and Plaza plumbing as yet unknown depths, *Agatha All Along*, like *WandaVision*, promises to bring the pathos along with the comedy – and a smattering of musical numbers. 'Get ready for some songs,' teases Schaeffer. **KIM TAYLOR-FOSTER**

AGATHA ALL ALONG LAUNCHES ON DISNEY+ ON 19 SEPTEMBER.

TRAILER BREAKDOWN

BLOOD COUNT

NOSFERATU There will be blood as Robert Eggers goes full goth...

1

'Come to me,' says Ellen Hutter (Lily-Rose Depp) in a plaintive quiver. It would seem that Nosferatu obeys her call a little too zealously – she screams as a pale hand clutches at her throat.

2

Robert Eggers' homeboy Willem Dafoe plays the Van Helsing-alike Professor Albin Eberhart von Franz in this reimagining of F.W. Murnau's silent masterpiece, which riffed on/ripped off Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

3

Ellen's hubby, Thomas (Nicholas Hoult), is an estate agent who travels to the Transylvanian castle of a certain Count Orlok (Bill Skarsgård) to discuss securing him a Victorian property in the city.

4

Our first glimpse of Orlok, surrounded by flickering candles that recall Eggers' debut *The Witch*. The Count appears to be naked and munching down on something. Rat? Human jugular? McPlant burger and fries?

5

The trailer favours atmosphere over plot, and here's one of the dripped-in-dread money shots: a vast shadowy hand reaching over a sprawling settlement full of prey. The film's scale looks impressive.

6

After flash cuts of coffins, flames, people screaming, a plunging stake and wide, blood-leaking eyes, we get another glimpse of Orlok. 'We are here encountering the vampire,' says von Franz. 'Nosferatu.' **JAMIE GRAHAM**

NOSFERATU OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 3 JANUARY 2025.

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TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

Zack Snyder promises audiences an epic, brutal and sexy animated adventure in this upcoming Netflix show. The eight-part series brings the *300* director's grand vision of ancient Norse mythology to life – complete with some familiar gods, including Thor, Loki and Odin.

'I feel that our Thor and Loki are much more in line with the spirit of the written mythology compared to the way they've been popularised in other movies and games,' Snyder exclusively tells *Teasers*. 'Loki really is the trickster in this.'

Twilight of the Gods isn't the auteur's first foray into animation – or, seemingly, his last. Snyder directed the 2010 animated movie *Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'Hoole* and is considering future projects in the format. 'We've talked a lot about it,' he confesses. 'We're really open to it.'

TWILIGHT OF THE GODS LAUNCHES ON NETFLIX ON 19 SEPTEMBER.

SHOWCASE ROUND-UP

GODS AND MONSTERS

NEXT ON NETFLIX ANIMATION *Teasers* takes a peek at Netflix's upcoming animation slate at a swish showcase event in Los Angeles...

TERMINATOR ZERO

Judgment Day isn't too far away. It's 29 August, to be exact. The latest entry in the blockbuster franchise sees Timothy Olyphant as the voice of the Terminator in a show that boasts a very distinct anime style. Expect to see cyborgs in a new light in this Japan-set story, which follows a female soldier sent back in time to 1997 to protect an AI developer and save the world. Bring it on.

TERMINATOR ZERO STREAMS ON NETFLIX FROM 29 AUGUST.

SPELLBOUND

Shrek director Vicky Jenson returns for more family-friendly fun with a magical musical that features a score from *Beauty and the Beast* composer Alan Menken. The top-tier cast includes Rachel Zegler, Nicole Kidman and Nathan Lane. '*Spellbound* is about Ellian, the tenacious daughter of the rulers of Lumbria,' explains Lane. 'A mysterious spell has turned her parents into monsters.' Eek.

SPELLBOUND STREAMS ON NETFLIX FROM 22 NOVEMBER.

IN YOUR DREAMS

In Your Dreams promises to be a cracker of a comedy. An adorable toy giraffe is the scene-stealer here. Voiced by Craig Robinson, his name is Baloney Tony and he's chock full of one-liners. Simu Liu is the voice of the movie's father character. 'The film is incredible,' says the *Shang-Chi* actor. 'It's filled with so much heart. It was one of the most beautiful scripts I'd read.'

IN YOUR DREAMS STREAMS ON NETFLIX IN 2025.

THE TWITS

Emilia Clarke, Natalie Portman and Johnny Vegas are a few of the famous voices in *The Twits*. Written and directed by Phil Johnston – who co-wrote Disney's *Zootropolis* – the film is a twisted tale about the meanest, smelliest, nastiest people in the world. Says Clarke: 'You want to know what I'm actually playing? A bedbug in Mr. Twit's beard. I'm a literal parasite!' **ADAM TANSWELL**

THE TWITS STREAMS ON NETFLIX IN 2025.

NETFLIX

A comic look at faith, family and other complex relationships

FIRST WORD

FINDING FAITH

BETWEEN THE TEMPLES Jason Schwartzman preps Carol Kane for a belated Bat Mitzvah.

Jason Schwartzman's Ben Gottlieb is in a low place when we first meet him in *Between the Temples*. A cantor questioning his faith, he's also grieving his late wife, living with his mother (Caroline Aaron) and her meddling partner (Dolly De Leon), and feeling pretty hopeless. That is, until his grade-school music teacher Carla (Carol Kane) unexpectedly re-enters his life seeking a late Bat Mitzvah.

'The role of Ben was written for Jason,' director and co-writer Nathan Silver (*Thirst Street*, *The Great Pretender*) explains, adding that he and co-writer C. Mason Wells immediately had him in mind. 'We were just thinking that he hadn't had a lead role in a while. We wanted to see him on screen more.' Not that it was easy to find time in his schedule, being the booked and busy actor he is. 'We had to get Francis Ford Coppola to dictate a letter saying that Jason would be released from *Megalopolis* so that we could go forward with our movie!' the director exclaims. 'Everything worked in our favour and allowed us to make this, but it feels like a miracle.'

Thankfully we get to see a lot of Schwartzman in this, giving a big, emotional performance as Ben and Carla become inexplicably attached to one another. 'Adam Kersh [producer] said we should do a riff on *Harold and Maude*,' Silver recalls of the idea behind the movie's central relationship. But it's not a simple age-gap romance. 'I'm really fascinated by this idea where you can't put your finger on what kind of relationship it is. I think we have so many relationships in life where we don't know if they're romantic, but there's something that's stronger than a friendship.'

'We need more movies about people that are chaotic'
NATHAN SILVER

Carla and Ben form an unlikey connection

Kane's character Carla was originally inspired by Silver's mother, but soon became a broader role that befitted the experienced actor. 'The character took on other dimensions and what remained of my mother was just her upbringing,' Silver says. 'Carol, there's just this wonderful screwball quality to her that seemed perfect for the role, as well as real vulnerability.'

To have *Between the Temples* premiere at Sundance Film Festival, and subsequently be picked up by a big distributor, seems to have floored Silver a bit. 'I questioned every day if people were pranking me. I was in utter disbelief,' he says. 'It's hard enough to make a movie that works in the ways you intended it to. For it to actually find a place in the world? I'm in awe.'

In a time when making smaller, personal films is harder than ever, the director says, 'if this movie is proof of anything, it's that we need more movies about people that are chaotic, and funny.' **LAUREN MILES**

BETWEEN THE TEMPLES OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 23 AUGUST.

SONY

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EXCLUSIVE

A WING AND A PRAYER

THE CROW Rupert Sanders brings the classic goth tale of revenge back to break our hearts all over again.

Bill Skarsgård takes on the role of Eric in a new adap of the graphic novel

There's a lot that's changed since the 1989 publication of James O'Barr's *The Crow*, particularly when it comes to portrayals of women. The director of the latest adaptation, Rupert Sanders, tells *Teasers* that he wanted to focus on the tragic love story at the source material's core. 'I stood away from hollow revenge. Like, "You killed my flashback; I kill a thousand people." FKA twigs [who plays Shelly] is incredible and I really wanted her to have that time on screen to make us fall in love with her so that we would go along with Eric on his journey.'

The director of *Snow White and the Huntsman* and 2017's *Ghost in the Shell* is quick to point out this is 'a scrappy, independent, R-rated production.' The film languished for years in development hell with many different directors and actors tied to the project, but Sanders credits his team's 'tenacity' to it finally making it to cinemas. In this iteration, Bill Skarsgård is Eric, aka The Crow, who comes back from the dead to avenge Shelly's murder.

It's a story with multiple dark clouds hanging over it. O'Barr's comic-book series was written in the wake of his girlfriend being killed in a drunk-driving incident, while star Brandon Lee was killed by a prop gun shooting the 1994 film. Sanders himself is superstitious enough that he debates with *Teasers* whether or not it's acceptable to call *Macbeth* by its name rather than The Scottish Play (surely it's fine when you aren't in the theatre?) but had more practical solutions on set. 'I don't think there's a superstitious element to this movie, personally,' the director asserts. 'I think tragic things, like what happened to Brandon Lee, shouldn't happen on a film set and we are pretty fastidious about checks and controls around stunt work. If you have a strategic set of controls in place then, touch wood, everything's safe.'

'I don't think there's a superstitious element to this movie, personally'
RUPERT SANDERS

Director Rupert Sanders was determined that FKA twigs' turn as Shelly would be more than just a hollow flashback

Those checks and safeguards become even more important when you have a lead actor like Skarsgård who's willing to literally throw himself into practical effects challenges. 'After 40 days of night shoots there was this big tank of black oil, and I said, "Bill, you wouldn't like to get in there and thrash around naked for us, would you?" And he was like, "Sure!" and jumped straight in.'

Those images appear in the title sequence, and Sanders' goal is that they are among many that will linger with the audience long after the film has ended. 'I call them retinal scars. So many films that I've seen I carry with me subconsciously; they're always there. If people say there's one image still with them years after, then I think I've done my job.' **LEILA LATIF**

THE CROW OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 23 AUGUST.

LARRY HORRICKS, ENTERTAINMENT FILM DISTRIBUTORS

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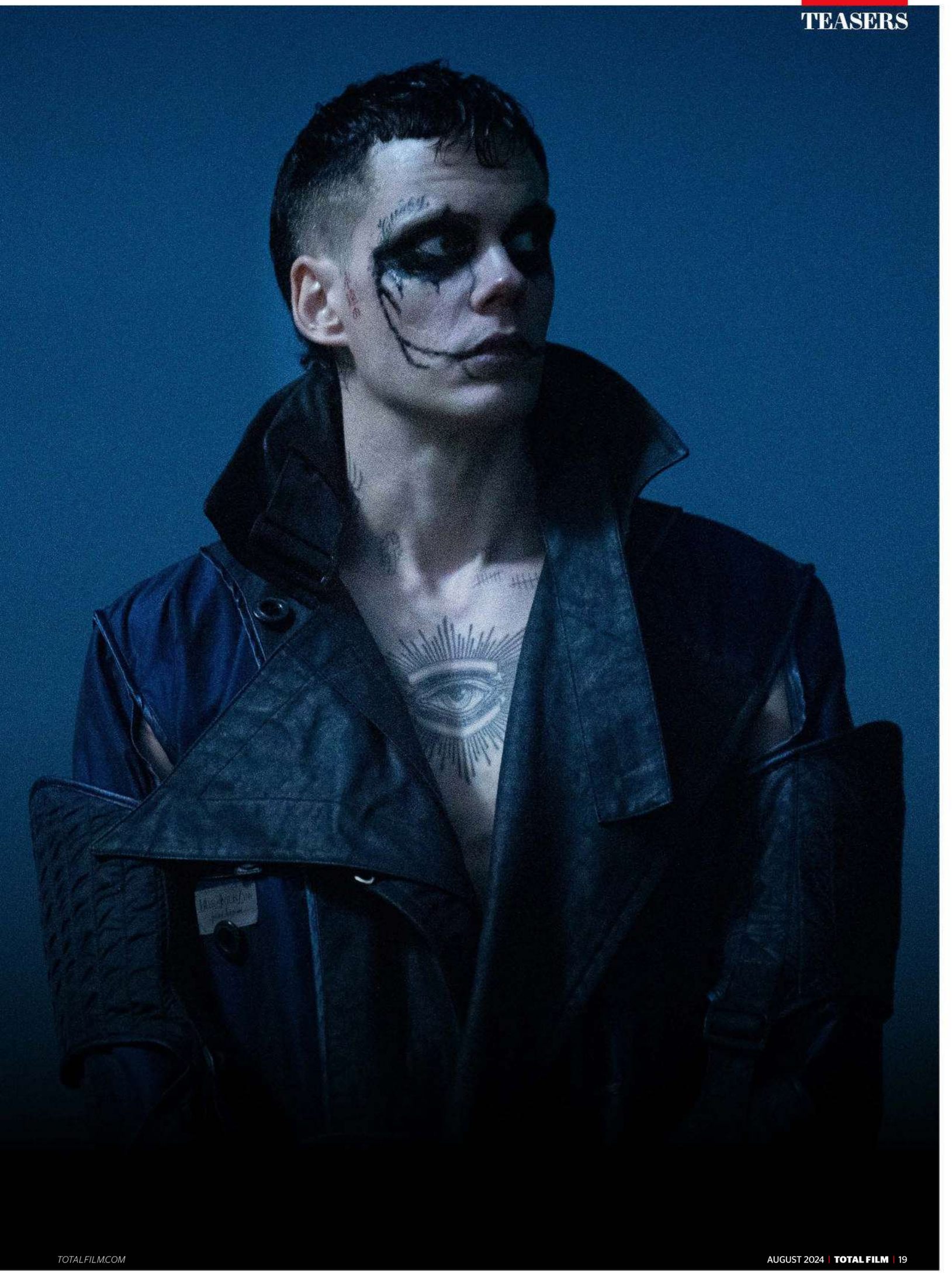

NEXT BIG THING

ARIANA GREENBLATT IS BLOWING UP

She may only be 16, but Ariana Greenblatt has already had the kind of career most veteran actors would envy. The go-to for younger versions of iconic characters (Ahsoka Tano, *Avengers: Infinity War*'s young Gamora), Greenblatt also memorably schooled Barbie in Greta Gerwig's box-office titan. Next up: she'll appear as fan-favourite, bunny-eared, pre-teen munitions expert Tiny Tina in *Borderlands*.

How does Tiny Tina fit into the *Borderlands* crew?
She is the boss, and everyone is scared of her! Whatever Tina says, they get it done. But because she is so young and is dealing with all this stuff, a lot of the gang see her and want to protect her. And even though Tina hates that, she appreciates having that core family, which is really sweet.

Margot Robbie's Harley Quinn was an inspiration – how so?
The first time I read the sides for my audition I was immediately imagining Harley's facial expressions, and how when something crazy would happen, it would fuel her soul – that's the connection I saw. I told Margot when I read for *Barbie:* 'By the way, my character [in *Borderlands*] is inspired by you!'

Did playing Gamora and Ahsoka prepare you for a beloved character like Tiny Tina?
Totally. It's so funny, I'm always thrown into super-crazy, passionate fandoms. I'm always like, 'I hope they like me!' As a fan of so much stuff myself, I get the love. I try to do everything in my power to please the fans, and also the people who don't know anything about the character.

What's next?
My goal from the beginning was to never set these crazy milestones. I'm so grateful and fortunate that I've been in films like *Barbie* and *Infinity War*. I never in a million years would have expected that to happen. What keeps me going is: whatever creatively fulfils me is what I want to do. **JORDAN FARLEY**

BORDERLANDS OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 9 AUGUST.

TIZIANO LUGLI

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Kevin (Kal-El Tuck, centre) and his fellow time-travellers

EXCLUSIVE

REWRITING HISTORY

TIME BANDITS The minds behind *What We Do in the Shadows* are putting a crew together.

Lisa Kudrow stars as Penelope, who guides the gang on their adventures

Reimagining Terry Gilliam's anarchic 1981 time-travelling comedy *Time Bandits* for television, Taika Waititi and Jemaine Clement (along with co-creator Iain Morris) have assembled their own motley gang of thieves for an adventure through time and space – led by discontented oddball Penelope (Lisa Kudrow) and young history buff Kevin Haddock (Kal-El Tuck).

Why is the time right for a remake of *Time Bandits*?

Taika Waititi: I feel like I got tricked into doing it. I went to a meeting and I didn't know what it was for. It was 15 minutes until I heard someone say *Time Bandits*. As I left, my manager said: 'Congratulations, you seemed so disinterested that they panicked and want to make a deal.'

How did you go about reinventing the Bandits for a modern audience?

TW: A lot was the Bandits themselves and creating an interesting dynamic around Kevin. I've always loved the idea of working with Lisa [Kudrow], and the idea of having her lead this ragtag group of time-travelling thieves really appealed to me.

Jemaine Clement: A frustrated leader who you wouldn't expect to be a thief. One guy who's the navigator, who needs to be with the map. Some of it's inherited from the movie. The things that we liked.

Did you know when you started writing that you two would play Pure Evil and Supreme Being?

JC: We had big lists of people we thought might play those roles. And it didn't make sense, budget wise, to bring someone from overseas to be in New Zealand for five months.

TW: Not when you've got two Marlon Brandos right here!

JC: It was fun to do. I liked doing those scenes in the Fortress of Darkness. They were fantastic. I love [Pure Evil]. I just found him so funny as a kid.

How did you choose Kal-El to play the character of Kevin?

JC: We loved his northern accent. We loved his accent and that he wasn't a posh kid. When we cast Kal-El, we based all the rest of his family on him, on his accent.

How did you balance your own comedic sensibilities with those of the original movie?

TW: We grew up watching a lot of Monty Python and *Blackadder* and *Fawlty Towers* and Terry Gilliam movies, so a lot of the influence that we had in our lives is going to filter back into the work. In a strange way, it's just like a weird evolution of their stuff, filtered through a couple of New Zealanders.

JC: We had to find an old copy of [Terry Gilliam and Michael Palin's 1981] script. Iain Morris got an old copy from the actual shoot. It's so unique and visual and beautiful. We've gone a different way and hopefully we've found something else that people can enjoy. **JOEL HARLEY**

'The idea of having Lisa Kudrow lead this ragtag group of time-travelling thieves really appealed to me'
TAIKA WAITITI

TIME BANDITS LAUNCHES ON APPLE TV+ FROM 24 JULY.

APPLE TV+

Irish rap trio Kneecap play themselves in the movie

EXCLUSIVE

BELFAST AND FURIOUS

KNEECAP How three rambunctious rappers and a former tabloid reporter made an award-winning Sundance sensation...

Teasers is in Belfast for a sit-down with Kneecap, a trio of rappers whose name, like the tricolour balaclava sported by one of its members, harks back to Northern Ireland's infamous Troubles. A bullet in the kneecap used to be a non-lethal way for paramilitaries to reprimand miscreants. Now it doubles as the title of the band's semi-autobiographical debut feature – an anarchic blend of hip-hop, social commentary and drug-fuelled farce that arrives in cinemas eight months on from taking Sundance by storm.

When journalist turned filmmaker Rich Peppiatt first encountered Kneecap in 2019, he was immediately taken by their energy and authenticity. 'I had not seen an audience so engaged since [90s rockers] Rage Against the Machine,' says the English helmer, who approached the group with the idea of a collaborative venture. Some months later, they agreed to a pint. 'We're very sceptical of English people trying to make money off Irish people,' laughs co-frontman Liam Óg Ó Hannaidh, aka Mo Chara. 'But he was very persistent, so we met up with him – and thank fuck we did.'

Given Kneecap largely rap in Irish, Peppiatt felt he should learn it himself before directing them on screen. 'The idea of making a film in a language I didn't speak was pretty tough,' he explains. 'I felt I had to get under the bonnet and understand why they talk so lovingly about it.' The preservation of Ireland's indigenous tongue is a key theme in _Kneecap_, with one character – fugitive Republican Arlo (Michael Fassbender) – declaring 'every word of Irish spoken is a bullet fired for Irish freedom.'

'Making a film in a language I didn't speak was tough'
RICH PEPPIATT

The crew fight to save Ireland's indigenous tongue

'Language is a big element in this movie,' nods Naoise Ó Caireallán, aka Móglaí Bap, who plays Arlo's rapper son. 'For a long time Ireland was deprived of its language, so I think people are wanting to reclaim it and use it in an urban setting.'

'Getting Michael on board was a massive coup,' Peppiatt gushes. 'He's one of the greatest character actors of his generation so he really did elevate it.' Even with his support, though, the director had to fight for one sequence: a phone-box split-screen in which father and son share a moment of wordless communion. 'I'm ecstatic you like that scene because I had to withstand quite a barrage of attempts to take it out!' smiles the filmmaker, who was 'determined to leave it all on the table' in his first narrative endeavour.

As for the balaclava: well, according to its wearer – ex-teacher JJ Ó Dochartaigh, aka DJ Próvai – it 'smells like the inside of a false leg' after too much unlaundered usage. 'It's always been cool,' he says of his contentious headgear. 'But it's more a Halloween prop nowadays...' **NEIL SMITH**

KNEECAP OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 23 AUGUST.

CURZON

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Contributing editor **LEILA LATIF** has something to say...

Listen up: Colin Firth in British hit *The King's Speech*

THIS MONTH...
WHY THE NEW GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE HELPING THE BRITISH FILM INDUSTRY

THE LEILA WORD

General elections are like buses. Sometimes they appear in rapid succession, other times, you wait so long for one you have to check the news to see if the whole system has collapsed. After nearly five years, Rishi Sunak, Keir Starmer, Ed Davey and Count Binface faced off and, while this magazine went to print the day before the polls closed, by the time you read this you'll know who will be in charge of the country. This is a film column, not a politics one, but whoever you voted for will also dictate the future of the British film industry in a very precarious time.

When I talked to a producer pal a few weeks back, she spoke of just how dire things have become. Many American productions use British studios, locations and crews, and the fallout of the 2023 strikes means work had been thin on the ground, with colleagues who are usually booked back-to-back calling her desperate to find out if she's heard of any work going. Beyond the anecdotal, the BFI published that the number of productions for Q1 of 2024 was just 22, where it had been 74 in 2023, 105 in 2022 and 80 in 2021 despite a pandemic raging on. To make matters more depressing, Channel 4 recently published a study showing that the number of working-class film creatives is currently the lowest in a decade, making up only 8% of the workforce.

ALAMY

It's not like this happens in a bubble. Working-class actors like Brian Cox, James McAvoy and Daniel Kaluuya have talked about the 'class ceiling' for years and have made programmes and set up initiatives to give children the same opportunities to explore the dramatic arts that they had. McAvoy's 2015 interview now reads like a prophecy, explaining that we'd see working-class people squeezed out of the film industry with less funding and access to the arts. The actor correctly predicted: 'That doesn't affect us right now, but it will affect us five years from now, 10 years from now.' Whether or not you entirely agree with McAvoy, it is undeniable that we should all take great national pride in the UK's creativity. This is the birthplace of William Shakespeare, Laurence Olivier and Judi Dench, after all. Sure, it's not all been perfect, and the UK Film Council infamously once spent £1 million of public money on the truly dire *Sex Lives of the Potato Men*, but that same fund supported work from Ken Loach, Shane Meadows, Richard Ayoade and Andrea Arnold to name but a few so... net positive!

If you bring it down to brass tacks, the UK film industry contributed £12.6 billion to the UK economy in 2022, and before the Film Council was closed down in 2011, one of its last projects, the Oscar-winning *The King's Speech*, grossed $472 million worldwide on a $15 million budget. Plenty of things are still being done to help our cinema thrive, from tax breaks to funding, which make us the envy of many nations, but it's still only a fraction of the support French filmmakers get from their government.

So whoever you voted for, or indeed if you decided to vote at all, I'm not judging you (unless it was for Count Binface – in which case, grow up). There are a million reasons to opt for one party over another, and one of the great parts of our democracy is you can keep what box you ticked a secret forever, just as I will take to my grave that I thought that [REDACTED] didn't deserve that Oscar. But I hope you considered your vote's impact on the films you love and all the wonderful people that make them. Our film industry needs people who care about it in charge, and since elections are like buses, we don't know when we'll get another chance to save it.

LEILA WILL BE BACK NEXT ISSUE. FOR FURTHER MUSINGS AND MISSIVES FOLLOW @LEILA_LATIF ON X/TWITTER.

EXCLUSIVE

SHELL YEAH

TALES OF THE TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES

The heroes in a half-shell return to the small screen...

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were revitalised for a new generation in *Mutant Mayhem*, the movie reboot produced by Seth Rogen that truly put the emphasis on the *teenage* as the reptilian bipeds battled outsider status and longed to fit in at high school. As the half-shelled quartet's adventures continue in Paramount+ series *Tales of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, executive producers Chris Yost and Alan Wan tell *Teasers* what to expect from the animated spin-off...

GAME OF TONES

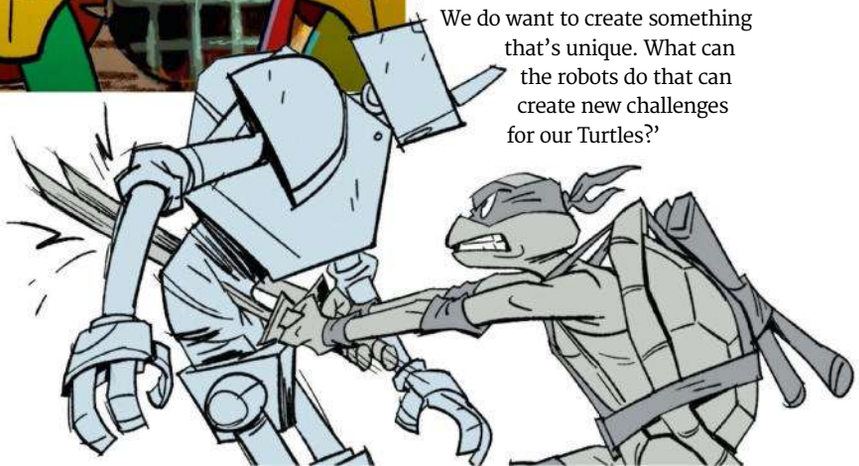
Beginning work on the show a couple of years ago, before *Mutant Mayhem* was in cinemas, Yost met with that film's director, Jeff Rowe, and producers Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, 'and just started coming up with ideas for what the show could be... They were supercool and super-supportive. At the end of the day, it was really just a matter of lining up with what the movie was doing, and hitting the main tone, the main voice, the main feel of the movie,' says Yost.

STYLE GUIDE

Mutant Mayhem had a distinct, painterly art style, which *Tales...* transposes to 2D. 'We're working with the same kind of storytelling approach, but obviously the artistry of it is a bit different because we're hand-drawn,' explains Wan. 'On the TV show it's more sketchy lines. It has a real teenager-drawing feel to it.' That also provided some narrative freedom. 'The fun of it was, the kids are telling the stories. It gave us a lot of leeway that, if things get a little crazy, it's a bunch of 15-year-old kids sitting around and telling stories,' adds Yost.

THE FIGHT STUFF

Harking back to the earliest series, the Turtles have robots to fight – Mechazoids, led by a new take on Bishop, the villain of the first arc – meaning they can let rip without the series feeling too violent. 'The action is definitely a huge part of our show's DNA,' says Wan. 'But we also want to make sure that it's tied to a story. It's not action for action's sake... We do want to create something that's unique. What can the robots do that can create new challenges for our Turtles?'



SUPERBAD BOYS

When it comes to influences, 'I watched a lot of *Superbad*, really, more or less, to get the voice,' says Yost. 'We watched the movie over and over.' The series also reprises the cast of relatively unknown teens (Micah Abbey, Shamon Brown Jr., Nicolas Cantu, Brady Noon) voicing the Turtles, with Ayo Edebiri returning as April O'Neil. 'The cast that we've inherited from the movie – I'll take that all day,' says Yost. 'At the end of the day, all four kids were cast perfectly. Ayo, as April, is amazing – just a phenomenal talent. Those four kids know their Turtle – their version of that Turtle – better than anybody.'

WORLD BUILDING

Picking up immediately where the film left off, after Superfly stomped up a heap of trouble in New York City, the series' stories are framed as the comic-book doodlings of Leo, harking back to the Turtles' roots as comic-book characters. 'We always try to honour the comics, because that's where it all came from,' says Yost. 'Forty years later, here we are, telling these stories.' This season comprises two six-episode arcs; *Teasers* has seen the first six, which take a *Rashomon*-esque approach of following a different character each episode.

POWER OF FOUR

With the brothers split up and challenged in their individual episodes, 'it gets to put the spotlight on the individual Turtles, and you kind of see what makes them tick,' explains Yost. 'What are they like on their own? Visually, from an art standpoint, we've been able to do a lot of fun stuff on that end as well.' Each character also invites shake-ups in the art style, via some fun interludes. 'Those are very character-based,' says Wan. 'With Donnie, it's 8-bit. With Raph, it's action movies. With Leo, it's comics. And then Mikey, it's the teenage sketchbook. We definitely want to play towards those personalities…'

PARAMOUNT+

NEXT GEN

Yost and Wan have combined experience of working on Turtles for over two decades, and still respect that responsibility. 'Every episode could be somebody's first,' considers Yost. 'And we do want to make sure that whoever watches it – both the older generation and newer generation – can enjoy it,' adds Wan. It's not hard to imagine it sparking the interest of a new generation of fans. 'Honestly, those four individual personalities are what has made the Turtles such a lasting phenomenon,' says Yost. **MATT MAYTUM**

TALES OF THE TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES
STREAMS ON PARAMOUNT+ FROM 10 AUGUST.

Vince Vaughn plays an ex-cop sent on a new mission

5 THINGS

GOING APE

BAD MONKEY Vince Vaughn's former detective returns to a murky world of crime and corruption.

1 IT STARTS WITH A SEVERED ARM

'It's based on a Carl Hiaasen book, so I can't take credit for that!' producer Bill Lawrence (*Ted Lasso*, *Shrinking*) says of *Bad Monkey*'s opening. The loose limb, dredged up in Florida – 'the floating-body-parts capital of the word,' as Lawrence calls it – kicks off the story of Andrew Yancy (Vince Vaughn), 'a kind of down-and-out former police officer in the Keys. His chief wants him to take the severed arm to Miami.'

2 IT'S THE SORT OF SHOW PEOPLE DON'T MAKE ANY MORE

Lawrence has a lot of praise for Hiaasen's books. 'They remind me of those fun movies that people don't make any more,' he explains, citing *48 Hrs.* as an example. 'There's a caper, or a case, but really you're just into the characters and how they bounce off each other.' Vaughn's character very much allowed him to improvise. 'I know that people will come up to me and say, "Oh, I love that moment when his character did this," and even though it was something he made up on the spot, I'll just go, "Thank you!"'

3 THERE'S A MIXTURE OF CRIME, POLITICS AND COMEDY

'I'm a dinosaur. I came up in network TV, where your job was to write a TV show that appealed to everyone simultaneously,' the producer recalls, adding that while he had more creative freedom in making *Bad Monkey*, it still has broad appeal. 'I take great pride in the fact that *Bad Monkey* is a stylistic caper with some dark scenarios and cool visuals, but at the same time I think it's a banter-driven comedy, with unbelievable comedians in the cast.'

4 JODIE TURNER-SMITH TURNS HEADS

Turner-Smith is just one of the excellent supporting actors on the show, but Lawrence thinks her character, Dragon Queen, is one of the most exciting. 'In the book she's a much older, calm woman,' he says of the character, adding that they changed her quite a lot to fit the *Queen & Slim* actor. 'I just thought she was a really dynamic actor and she really pops in the show. When she comes into scenes you're like, "Whoa, who's that?"'

'Every animal that shows up in the show is real!'
BILL LAWRENCE

5 EXPECT CAMEOS FROM LOTS OF ANIMALS

One of the things Lawrence enjoys about Hiaasen's books is the strong environmental message and chapters about animals. It was a nice surprise, then, to be able to include lots of them in *Bad Monkey*. 'Every animal that shows up in the show is real – and we didn't bring them except for the monkey!' the producer exclaims, revealing that there's a real primate in the series. 'The animals just wandered onto set, so the most special moments to me are when you see them interacting with the actors.'

LAUREN MILES

BAD MONKEY STREAMS ON APPLE TV+ FROM 14 AUGUST.

APPLE TV+

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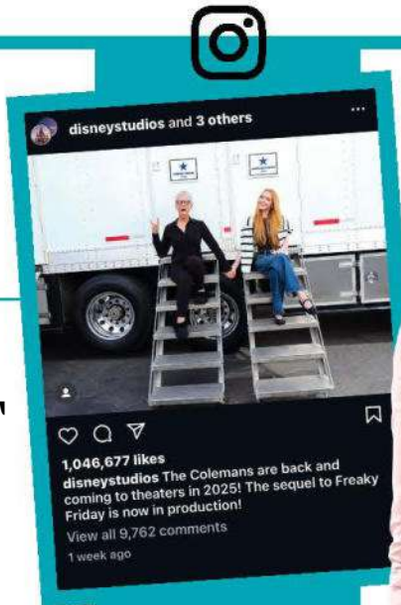
‘I THINK THE X-MEN FILM I’M IN IS THE GAYEST FILM THAT I’VE EVER DONE, AND THAT’S ME SAYING THAT!’

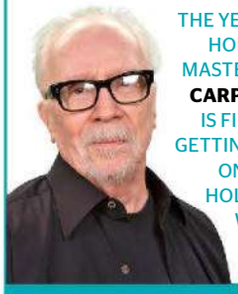
ALAN CUMMING REFLECTS ON PLAYING NIGHTCRAWLER IN 2003’S *X-MEN 2*.



‘Different people are being ferried in. You have to give each one of them attention, focus and an articulate answer that you just gave to the person before. That’s irritating.’

LUPITA NYONG’O DESCRIBES PRESS JUNKETS AS A ‘TORTURE TECHNIQUE’.

2025



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‘I HOPE THIS DOESN’T EMBARRASS HIM TOO MUCH, BUT I’M SORRY, MAN, I GOTTA DO THIS. THE GOAT CAME TO SEE ME – THE ONE AND ONLY MARTIN SCORSESE.’

JUSTIN TIMBERLAKE SALUTES A LEGEND WHILE PLAYING MADISON SQUARE GARDEN.

GAME CHANGER

PRODUCTION COMPANY BLUMHOUSE HAS LAUNCHED BLUMHOUSE GAMES, WHICH WILL PRODUCE HORROR VIDEO GAMES.

GOOD THING

BAD THING

BLUNT FORCE

DIRECTOR YANN DEMANGE HAS EXITED MARVEL’S LONG-IN-DEVELOPMENT *BLADE* REBOOT, DUE FOR RELEASE NEXT YEAR.

‘THERE’S A LOT MORE TO TELL WHICH IS WHY WE GO, “OK, THIS IS KIND OF INTERESTING NOW TO BE ABLE TO DO THIS.”’

NICOLE KIDMAN IS EXCITED TO RETURN FOR A *PRACTICAL MAGIC* SEQUEL.

‘WHY IS NO ONE CALLING OUT GEORGE CLOONEY FOR BEING A NEPO BABY?’

EMMA ROBERTS THINKS MALE ACTORS HAVE IT EASIER.

DISNEY/PIXAR. GETTY

Many fear the loss of creativity if AI is used in filmmaking

CAN WE TALK ABOUT?

AI AND CINEMA

WHY DID A LONDON CINEMA PULL THE SCREENING OF AN AI-SCRIPTED FILM?

MATT GLASBY
@MATTGLASBY

In June, London's Prince Charles Cinema advertised a private showing of a new film called, ominously, *The Last Screenwriter*. The kicker? It was written entirely by AI.

'Created' by Swiss director Peter Luisi, *The Last Screenwriter* concerns a scriptwriter (played by Nicholas Pople) who quickly finds his efforts surpassed by an AI system. Apparently the filmmakers 'wanted to find out if artificial intelligence is able to write an entire feature film and how good this film would be if produced by a professional team'. A statement that, in itself, might have been written by ChatGPT.

Faced with an online backlash, the Prince Charles Cinema (PCC) cancelled its planned screening of the film, citing 'the strong concern held by many of our audience on the use of AI in place of a writer'. But did this show of integrity stifle some much-needed debate?

Whether *The Last Screenwriter* is a pioneering experiment or opportunism, there are vital conversations to be had about AI in cinema. Is it a revolutionary way to level the creative playing field? Is it plagiarism?

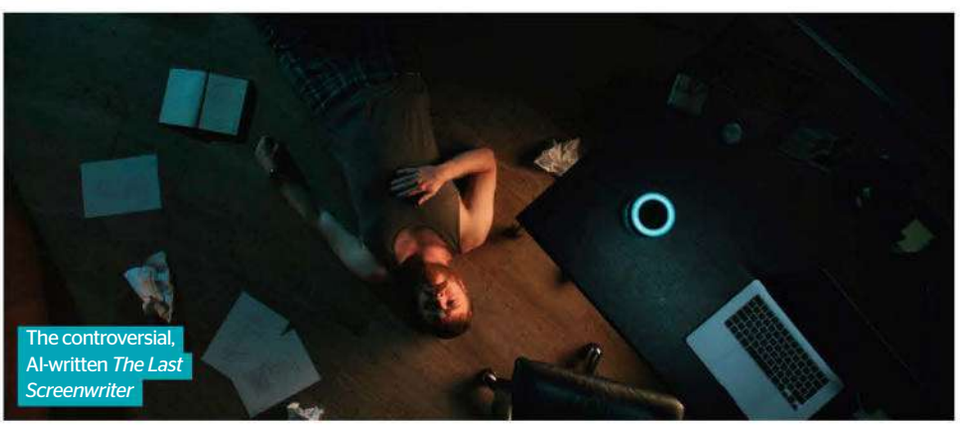
And is it, already, too late to be asking these questions? In the same month, the Annecy Animation Festival in France showed several AI efforts, to boos from the crowd.

> 'DID THIS SHOW OF INTEGRITY STIFLE SOME MUCH-NEEDED DEBATE?'

Still, it's hard to argue with the PCC's stance. Hollywood has often treated writers appallingly, and would surely prefer to let computers spaff out their latest blockbusters instead. But that doesn't mean we should just blithely welcome our new robot overlords.

The PCC has been championing alternative cinema since the 1960s. In any week, you might be able to experience such man-made delights as *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *In the Mood for Love*, *Magnolia* or *Midsommar*. Frankly, if such a place won't stand up for real creativity then who will?

Replacing writers with AI may make the filmmaking process smoother – and cheaper – but it completely misses the point. It's not meant to be smooth. At its best, cinema offers us a glimpse inside the human heart in all its eccentric, messy glory. And there's no way AI can ever replicate that.



The controversial, AI-written *The Last Screenwriter*

GETTY, SPOTLIGHT MEDIA PRODUCTIONS AG

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Isabelle Huppert (centre) makes her presence felt, with Rebecca Marder and Nadia Tereszkiewicz

EXCLUSIVE

COURT IN THE ACT

THE CRIME IS MINE French director François Ozon has his #MeToo moment...

I was not on the list,' jokes François Ozon, the prolific French director behind everything from *Swimming Pool* and *Under the Sand* to *By the Grace of God*. The 'list', allegedly set to be circulated during the recent Cannes Film Festival, consists of 10 male French actors and directors who have allegedly sexually abused female colleagues. While this exposé didn't quite unfold in the way the rumours predicted, it was clear that France – finally – is having its #MeToo moment.

'France is very much preoccupied with it now, and it's becoming positive, but it took its time,' says Ozon, whose latest work *The Crime Is Mine* must also be considered in light of the #MeToo movement that began after producer Harvey Weinstein was exposed for serial abuses in 2017. 'The French are not necessarily quick with those sort of things. But now there is a movement forward, and you can see that things are being said. There's been this cult of the director's genius, the sort of living god, especially led through the [French] New Wave, and they took advantage of this status. But I think it's changing.'

Ozon's latest is actually a take on Georges Berr and Louis Verneuil's 1934 comedy, which has twice been adapted by Hollywood, including 1937's *True Confession* with Carole Lombard. It was this film that Ozon first saw during the COVID-19 lockdown, when a friend suggested he watch it. 'I thought the film was not very good, but I saw in the credits it was adapted from a French play. So I was very curious... and I thought it was a good start to speak about the #MeToo situation today.'

Set in 1930s Paris, Ozon's film follows struggling actor Madeleine (*Rosalie*'s Nadia Tereszkiewicz) who is accused of murder when a lecherous producer who makes advances on her turns up dead. With her roommate Pauline (Rebecca Marder), an unemployed lawyer, defending her in court, Madeleine is suddenly thrust into the limelight. 'I like playing with the game of sincerity and lies,' says Ozon. 'The character at the heart is an actress. Not a very good one, but [she] becomes better through lying.'

François Ozon on set with Fabrice Luchini and Isabelle Huppert

'I like playing with the game of sincerity and lies'
FRANÇOIS OZON

While Ozon feels Tereszkiewicz and Marder are 'the two greatest young actors of their time right now', the film truly explodes when Isabelle Huppert, complete with frizzy hair in the style of legendary diva Sarah Bernhardt, makes a grand entrance in the final act. 'She steals the show,' laughs Ozon, who previously worked with Huppert on his musical *8 Women*. 'Isabelle, when she read the script, she said, "I arrive too late!" I said, "Don't worry, Isabelle, when you will be there, everybody will be focused on you. You will be the star." And she said, "OK, we try!"'

JAMES MOTTRAM

THE CRIME IS MINE OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 25 OCTOBER.

PARKLAND

Zhu Yilong as Ma Zhe, who leads the hunt for a killer in mid-90s rural China

EXCLUSIVE

THIS WAY MADNESS LIES

ONLY THE RIVER FLOWS A Chinese 90s-set neo-noir delivers all manner of moody vintage thrills...

When Chinese director Wei Shujun (*Striding into the Wind*) read the crime novella *Mistakes by the River* by Yu Hua, he fell immediately for its atmosphere. 'If I had to describe it, I would say it's like sailing on a ship in the dark,' he notes, talking to *Teasers* during the London Film Festival. 'You can't actually see the breeze, the wind, the waves, but you can feel their presence.'

Renamed as *Only the River Flows*, this 1990s-set tale follows Detective Inspector Ma Zhe (Zhu Yilong) as he investigates a serial killer who's been leaving victims by the riverbank near a small village in rural China. The methodical Ma, says the director, has 'always been a very rational person. He didn't believe in luck from the beginning. So he was trying to use logic and facts and objectivity to solve this crime.'

The more he delves into the case, the more he uncovers about the locals – and about his own obsessions. 'It's not a traditional whodunnit,' adds Wei. 'Rather it's a story that tells what's going on in a place and we see things through the protagonist, and through that we also understand more about this person and what's going on inside him.' That Ma's wife is pregnant, with a baby that may possibly have intellectual disabilities, adds to the inner turmoil he's feeling.

Shot by Chengma Zhiyuan in a retro vintage style, *OTRV* also flirts with the traditions of the film noir – albeit inadvertently. 'To be quite honest with you, I didn't even know what film noir was,' Wei admits, sheepishly. 'Only when I heard this term being used... I went to find out what it is.' He decided to explore the genre, looking into Chinese films such as Diao Yinan's Berlin-winning *Black Coal, Thin Ice* to get a sense of the fatalism that typifies noir.

'To be honest, I didn't even know what film noir was'
WEI SHUJUN

The film was shot mainly on 16mm for an authentic retro feel

Wei also kept the novella's 1990s setting, partly because he wistfully remembers the period growing up. Whether it's showing police ping-pong tournaments or setting up office in a cinema auditorium, the 'sense of camaraderie' between these law enforcers is clear – 'Unlike nowadays, when everyone is a single island. Everyone is individual and they only look at their mobile phone. At that time, everything was done collectively.'

It's why this unique tale of crime and punishment, set before the Chinese economic boom and after the Tiananmen Square massacre, is a cunning mixture of light and dark. 'In order to show up darkness you have to have light at the same time,' suggests Wei. 'It's actually the two sides of the same coin.' Or as he more cryptically puts it: 'If you are facing an abyss and looking at it, it is also looking back at you.' **JAMES MOTTRAM**

ONLY THE RIVER FLOWS OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 16 AUGUST.

LIAN RAY PICTURES. PICTUREHOUSE ENTERTAINMENT

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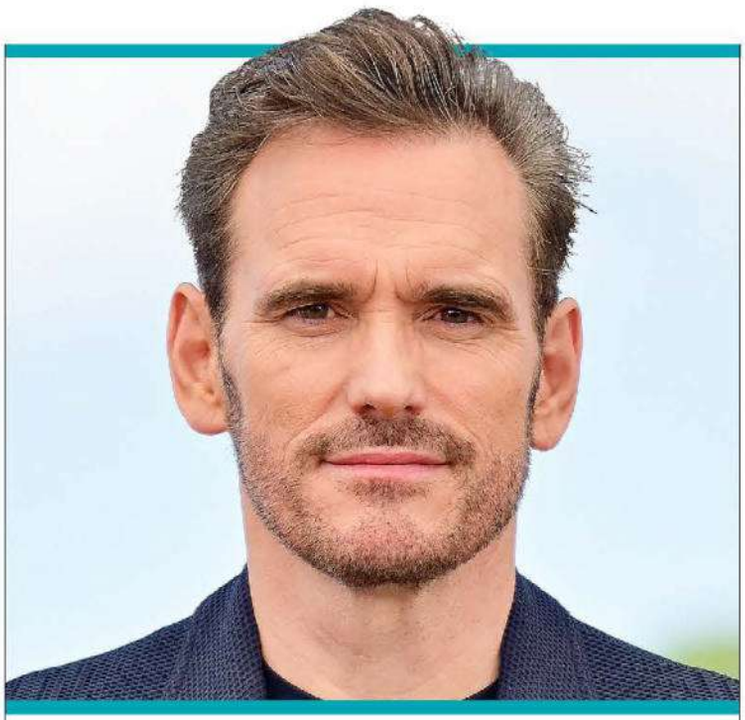
THE HERO



MATT DILLON

THE *RUMBLE FISH* AND *SINGLES* ACTOR REFLECTS ON FOUR DECADES OF STARDOM...

***The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish* made Matt Dillon one of the most sought-after stars of the 1980s. Unlike some of his peers, though, he went on to enjoy an eclectic career that will soon see him playing Marlon Brando – in French – in biopic *Being Maria*. 'I love challenges,' he admitted when *Teasers* chatted to him at the 20th Marrakech International Film Festival.**

The cast of *The Outsiders* now reads like a who's who of 1980s celebrity. Do you still keep in touch with any of your former co-stars?
I am always happy to see Ralph Macchio, Tom Cruise or Tommy [C. Thomas] Howell; I felt I developed a bond with the actors who came on that journey with me. I remember there were high jinks in the hotel we were staying in but I was not the instigator. You get a bunch of young guys in their late teens and early 20s and of course it's going to be like being in college.

What was it like working with Francis Ford Coppola at such a formative stage in your career?
It was great to work with him on *The Outsiders*, but I got much closer to him on *Rumble Fish*. Looking back, he was just so filled with life, enthusiasm and energy. Francis is a brilliant visual filmmaker but he's really in love with the people who populate his films. He has such a great affection for the characters in his stories.

Dennis Hopper played your dad in *Rumble Fish*. What are your memories of working with the great Hollywood hellraiser?
The character I played, Rusty James, had a repulsion or disrespect for his father because he was an alcoholic, and sometimes that became a thing with us that could have crossed over a little bit. But Dennis and I became friends and he was always very supportive of my career as an actor. I remember from *Drugstore Cowboy* on he was very into what I was doing.

That film was quite radical for its time for the way it depicted drug use. Was it difficult for you and director Gus Van Sant to get it made?
It was at a time when Ronald Reagan was president and 'Just Say No' was the mantra, so a movie dealing with drugs in a more objective way was considered risky and a little dangerous. I remember Gus and I would go meet various people about it and there were some who were really opposed to it. But then the film came out and was well received. I have noticed throughout my career that movies that take risks are often the ones that are rewarded the most.

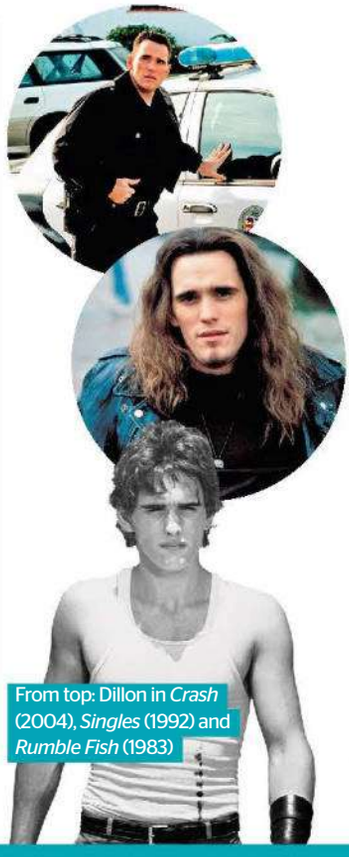
The 1990s saw you lighten up a little, particularly in *There's Something About Mary*. Was playing private investigator Pat Healy as much fun as it looked?
It's always fun to play a liar! Some of the things he said were shocking but they were supposed to be; he was tone-deaf and that was the humour of it. Part of what makes good comedy, and good drama, is having people say outrageous things and seeing what the response is.

What are your memories of *Crash* winning Best Picture at the 2006 Oscars?
Ryan Phillippe running across and almost tackling me to the ground because he was so happy about it! But we kind of had a feeling we had a shot. There's a tradition with the Oscars that whatever wins editing gets Best Picture. So when [Hughes Winborne was named Best Editor] we felt we had a chance.

You're playing Marlon Brando in *Being Maria*, a French-language film about the actor making *Last Tango in Paris* with Maria Schneider. What drew you to the project?
The script is told from Maria's point of view and was very well written so it was a no-brainer for me. Brando has always been an object of respect for me and I've been very influenced by his movies, so I had no choice but to do it. **NEIL SMITH**

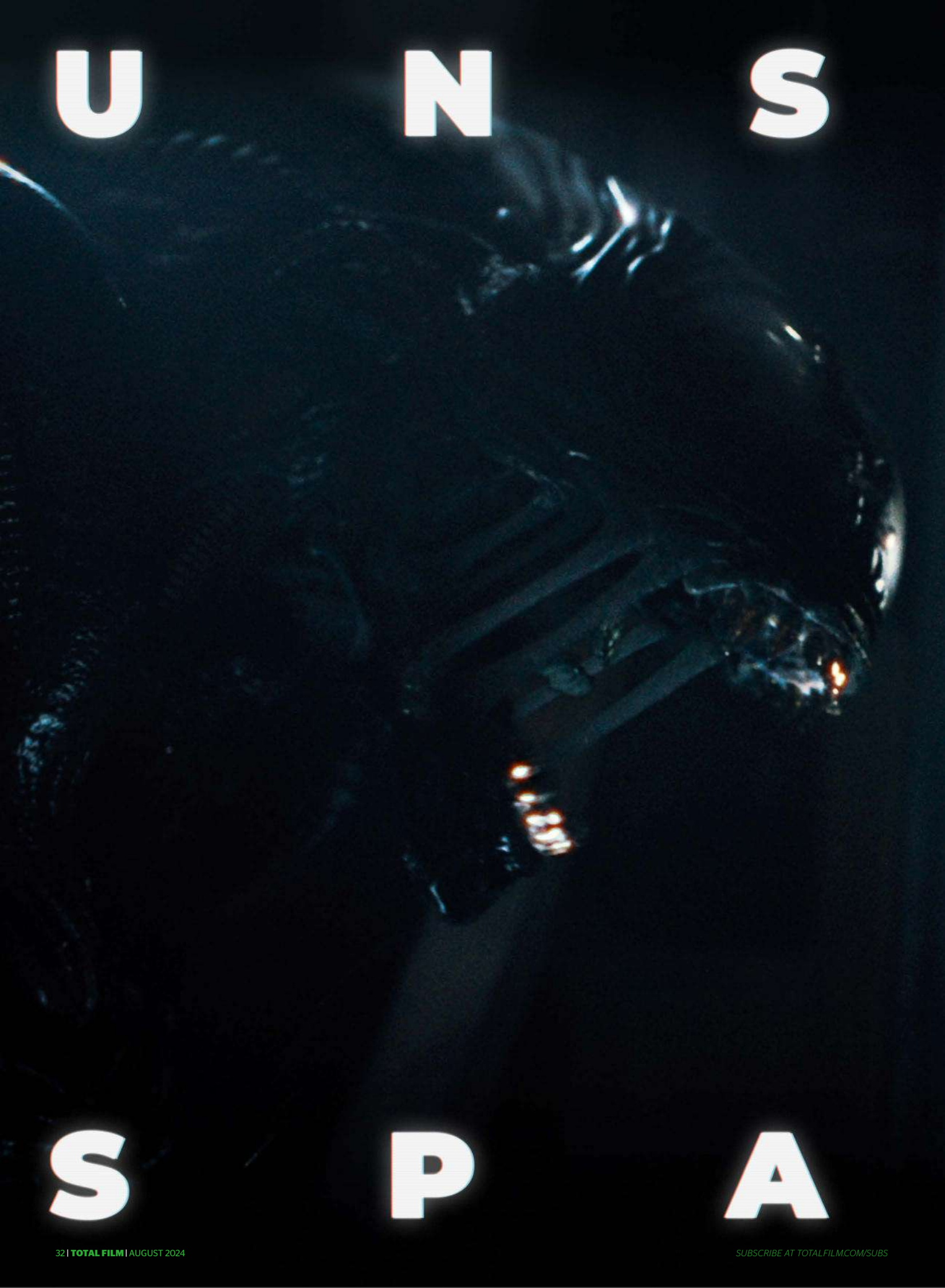
BEING MARIA'S UK RELEASE DATE IS TBC.

'MOVIES THAT TAKE RISKS ARE OFTEN THE ONES THAT ARE REWARDED THE MOST'



From top: Dillon in *Crash* (2004), *Singles* (1992) and *Rumble Fish* (1983)

ALAMY, GETTY



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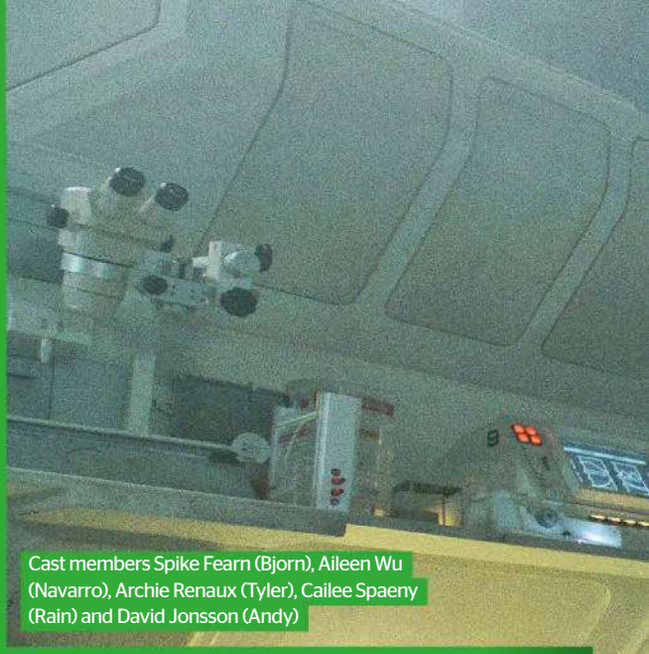
A F E C E

SET BETWEEN *ALIEN* AND *ALIENS*, BACK-TO-BASICS INTERQUEL **ALIEN: ROMULUS** IS SYNTHESISING TWO SCI-FI HORROR MASTERPIECES INTO ONE PERFECT ORGANISM, WHILE BRINGING FRESH BLOOD TO THE SERIES. *TOTAL FILM* TAKES AN EXPRESS ELEVATOR TO HELL WITH DIRECTOR FEDE ALVAREZ, ALONGSIDE STARS CAILEE SPAENY, DAVID JONSSON AND ISABELA MERCED, TO DISCUSS THE NEXT CHAPTER FOR THE MOTHER OF ALL CREATURE FEATURES.

WORDS JORDAN FARLEY

Tyler and Rain prepare to face the xenomorph assault



Cast members Spike Fearn (Bjorn), Aileen Wu (Navarro), Archie Renaux (Tyler), Cailee Spaeny (Rain) and David Jonsson (Andy)

Fede Alvarez has a question for *Total Film*: 'What do you prefer, *Alien* or *Aliens*?' But before *TF* can respond with a well-rehearsed speech ('Objectively? They're both unimpeachable masterworks. Subjectively? *Aliens* all day, baby!'), Alvarez reveals this is a hypothetical with a point. 'I think that's a perverse question,' the straight-talking Uruguayan filmmaker says over Zoom in late April. 'You should never be put through that choice.'

Alien: Romulus is his answer to that 'perverse question' of apples and oranges. Describing the film as 'an amalgamation of *Alien* and *Aliens* on many levels', everything from the environmental design to the pacing and the way the returning bestiary of Giger-accurate creatures is utilised in *Romulus* exists on a spectrum from the shadowy, slow-burn chills of *Alien* to the muscular, adrenalised thrills of *Aliens*.

'Every day we were like, "What movie are we making today?"' says star Cailee Spaeny (*Priscilla*, *Civil War*), who has the unenviable task of following Sigourney Weaver's Ellen Ripley as the new face of the series, while the xeno-slayer-in-chief is two decades into a peaceful 57-year hypersleep. '"Are we making *Alien* or *Aliens*? What are we going to channel today?" Because they're so different in tone.'

The idea to smash together two famously divergent classics is inspired to the point that it's surprising no one else had thought to do it in almost 40 years. The subsequent sequels may have much in them to recommend, but it's hard to argue with the fact that the Alien films reached their zenith with the first two instalments. And while the Ridley Scott-directed prequels are ambitious to a fault, the move away from interstellar terror towards more philosophically minded, horror-tinged sci-fi epics left ample room for a stripped-back return to Alien at its most primal.

> 'I WANTED TO SEE THE XENOMORPH AGAIN, BUT IN THE SETTING OF A PURE-BLOOD HORROR MOVIE'
>
> FEDE ALVAREZ

'That was what I was missing, in a way,' says Alvarez, who has impressive form reimagining horror classics, having helmed 2013's vicious *Evil Dead* remake. 'It's not that there's no horror in *Prometheus* and *Covenant*, but they're not *horror* movies. The first one, above all, is a pure horror movie. Like Ridley says, he wanted to do *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* in space. That's what I wanted; to see the xenomorph again, but in the setting of a pure-blood horror movie.'

Following the success of his horror thriller *Don't Breathe*, Alvarez found himself informally pitching this vision at Scott's production company Scott Free in 2017, during a general meeting with the legendary filmmaker. Drawn to the idea of an Alien movie featuring a fresh-faced line-up of xeno-victims-in-waiting, Scott and 20th Century Studios called on Alvarez and frequent collaborator Rodo Sayagues to start work on the script for *Romulus* several years later, in October 2021.

On their inspiration board throughout the writing process was a picture of Spaeny, who would go on to be cast as Rain Carradine. Speaking to *TF* from her home in Los Angeles, where framed movie posters adorn the wall – including an *Alien* quad opposite the sofa – Spaeny recalls an early, formative experience with Scott's classic. 'I have an initial memory of it being on in the house on a Saturday morning, and my dad watching it, and me going, "Oh, yeah. What's this about?"' Spaeny says, smile widening. 'And then the chestburster scene coming up, and me going, "Oh my god, I cannot watch this." It was so traumatic. But then I'd slowly come back and peek…'

Spaeny's experience closely mirrors that of her co-stars, most of whom (prepare to feel like the desiccated husk of a Space Jockey) weren't born when the fourth instalment *Alien: Resurrection* was released in cinemas in 1997, so are catching up on the series many years after the fact. For Alvarez, the idea of centring the story on the series' first 20-something crew stemmed from an early scene in the Special Edition of *Aliens* in which Hadley's Hope is glimpsed before the fall, with young children playing in the corridors and riding around on Weyland-Yutani trikes.

Fede Alvarez spoke to Ridley Scott and James Cameron about their previous visions before tackling *Romulus*

MURRAY CLOSE. DISNEY/20TH CENTURY STUDIOS

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'I always thought, "Wow, what would it be like for those kids to grow up in a terraforming colony that still needs another 50 years to be habitable?" You're probably going to take the same job as your parents. What's the hope?' questions Alvarez. 'Maybe it's because I'm from Uruguay and the idea of growing up in a place where you know how far you can get, and the things that happen there, and the things that will never happen there. So I always connected with those characters.'

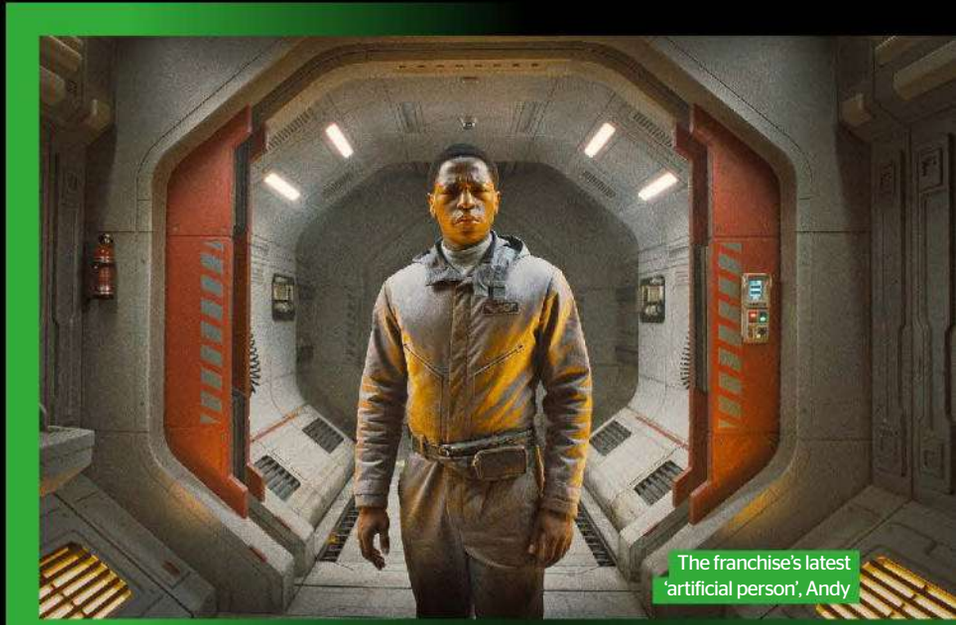
THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT

Hope is in desperately short supply on Jackson's Star, a Weyland-Yutani 'shake-and-bake' mining colony shrouded in perpetual night on the dark side of the planet, because there's no atmosphere (yet) to filter out their sun's radiation. Surface-bound for her entire life, 20-year-old Rain has never even seen natural light. 'We're trying to bring it back to these blue-collar people,' Spaeny says. 'We wanted the heart of it – where these kids came from – to feel authentic, as much as we possibly could.'

Rain's ex-boyfriend Tyler (Archie Renaux) and Bjorn (Spike Fearn) both work the mines and have a better reason than most to want to leave their futile lives behind. A lifeline arrives in the form of a decommissioned Weyland-Yutani space station – the *Renaissance* – which is pulled into orbit near Jackson's Star, offering the potential of a way out for any enterprising scavengers. Key to this mission

'WE'RE TRYING TO BRING IT BACK TO THESE BLUE-COLLAR PEOPLE... WE WANTED THE HEART OF IT TO FEEL AUTHENTIC'

CAILEE SPAENY



The franchise's latest 'artificial person', Andy

Stars Archie Renaux, Cailee Spaeny and David Jonsson

'I HAD [SIGOURNEY WEAVER'S] PERFORMANCE PLAYING ON REPEAT, HOPING SOMETHING WOULD SEEP IN'

CAILEE SPAENY

are Bjorn's adopted sister Navarro (Aileen Wu) – the technically minded pilot of their rust-bucket vessel *Corbelan IV* – and Tyler's 'sweetheart' sister Kay (Isabela Merced).

'They're taking a shot at making their future a little bit better than what it looks like on their home planet,' says Merced, who has James Gunn's *Superman* (where she'll appear as Hawkgirl) and the second season of *The Last of Us* to come in 2025. 'They all have that desperation to find a better place. It makes it all the more upsetting and saddening when the movie ends how all Alien movies end…'

Also along for the ride are Rain and her surrogate brother Andy, aka ND-255. An 'artificial person', as Bishop would have it, Andy is the closest thing Rain has to family following the death of her parents. Their sibling connection, and the question of whether there can be a true familial love between a human and an android, is the emotional core of the movie according to Alvarez, and is tested under the most extreme circumstances when face-hugging, chest-bursting, pharyngeal-jawed hell inevitably breaks loose aboard the *Renaissance*.

'In the first one, obviously Ripley does not trust synthetics,' says Spaeny. 'And it's switched around where my character is doing everything she can to protect [Andy], because that's her only family.'

'It's rather beautiful, actually,' adds David Jonsson, the *Rye Lane* and *Industry* star making his studio-movie debut with *Romulus*. 'It's a real first [for the series]. It adds a coming-of-age story. With Alien, you know that there's space, there's aliens, and you've got to kill them or be killed. Whereas with this wonderful brother-and-sister relationship, there's so much to play with.'

Like *Alien*'s Ash, Andy is a few transistors short of a circuit board. In one early scene glimpsed by *TF*, the synth freezes up in the middle of a facehugger attack, making him as much a liability as an asset. Jonsson initially auditioned for a 'smaller part' before being offered the role of Andy, and didn't take the responsibility lightly. 'I'm not going to lie to you, man. It does feel marginally intimidating,' says Jonsson, who is following Ian Holm (*Alien*), Lance Henriksen (*Aliens* and *Alien*^{3}), Winona Ryder (*Alien: Resurrection*) and Michael Fassbender (*Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*) as the series' latest synthetic. 'It feels like you're standing on the shoulders of giants. But I understand why I'm here. There's a real big first with my synthetic. All those actors are brilliant at zooming in on fine detail, and I really do think that Fede gave me an opportunity to do that, which I hope comes across.'

Standing on the shoulders of giants couldn't apply more to Spaeny, for whom Ripley loomed large. 'I had her performance playing on repeat for months. I was sort of hoping that something would seep in,' Spaeny notes. 'But I never felt intimidated. That role wasn't written for a woman, so there was real freedom. And because Sigourney injected all of herself into it, that then opens up any other female who's entering this franchise into not ever feeling that weird weight or pressure of playing a female lead.'

Spaeny did allow herself to channel her inner Ripley for at least one scene: the *Aliens*-homaging moment glimpsed in the film's first trailer in which Rain steps off a cargo elevator while packing a proto-Pulse Rifle. 'In a shot like that, you've got to lean in. You just go, "OK. Get those leaf-blowers ready! I'm going to hit that mark as slow as I possibly can,"' she says with a chuckle. 'I don't feel that cool, but it definitely looks cool!'

KEEPING IT REAL

Filming from late March to early July 2023 at Origo Studios in Budapest, on the same colossal soundstages as *Dune*, *Poor Things* and *Blade Runner 2049*, Alvarez had a specific vision of how to make *Romulus* – one that didn't necessarily tally with the way studio movies are made now. 'You always have to pick your battles as a director, and those were the battles he chose to fight,' says

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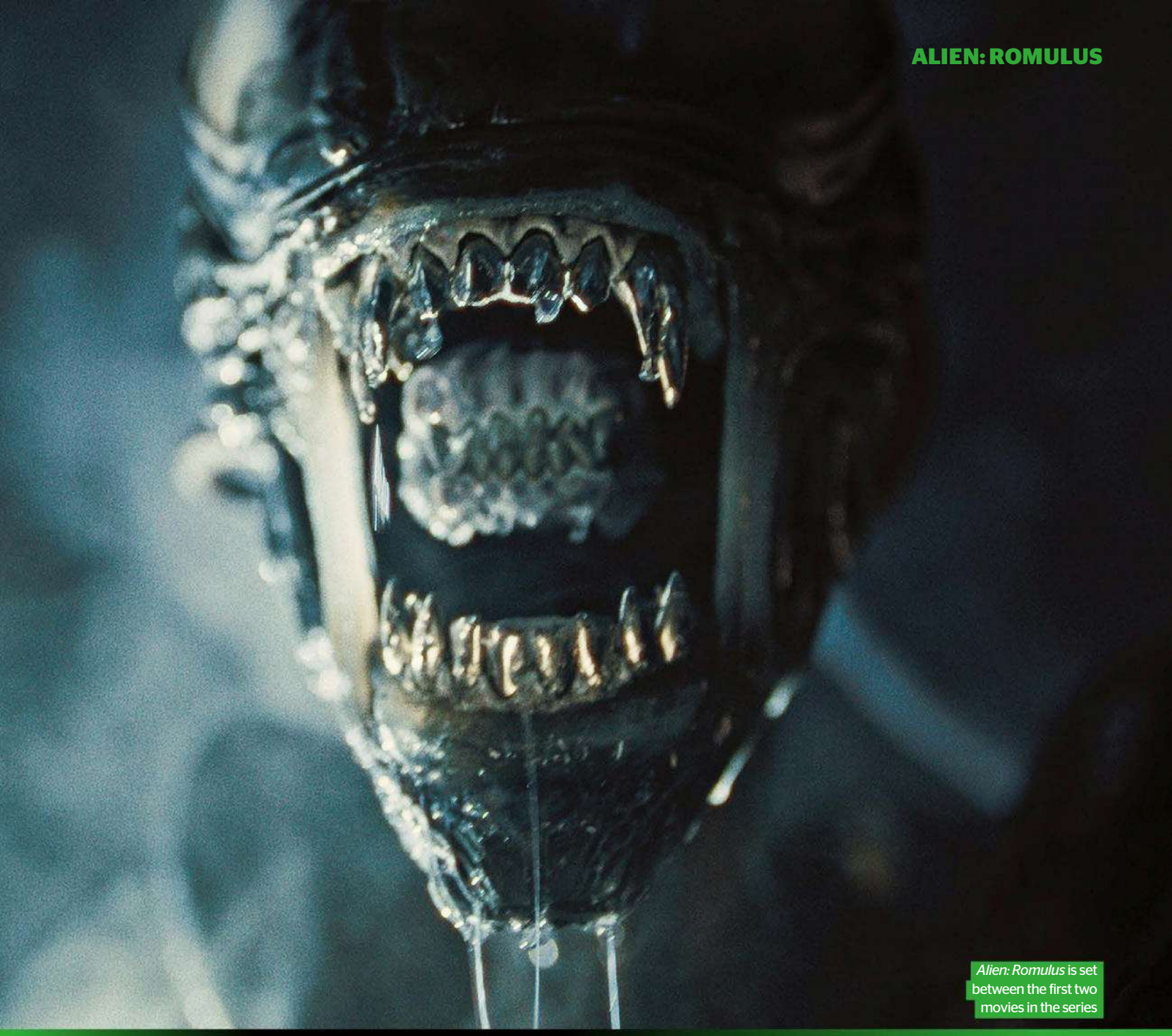

Alien: Romulus is set between the first two movies in the series

Spaeny. 'It was: "I want this to be as practical as possible. I want to shoot in chronological order. And I want the same craftsmen and artists and puppeteers from the previous movies."'

'We really went above and beyond to create a world that was exciting for me to be in,' Alvarez says – the opening salvo of a near-10-minute monologue to *TF*, such is his passion about the film's practically minded production, starting with the film's sprawling, interconnected sets. 'My movies are a bit of a theme park for the actors,' he explains. 'Because I attempt to create as many of the sets as I can, [linked] together, so that you can run through them for a long time – and there's no blue screens. Everything is a true experience for the actors. Hopefully that will translate to the audience's experience.'

Alongside production designer Naaman Marshall, Alvarez envisioned a subtle transition between the distinct design aesthetics of *Alien* and *Aliens* – from the used retro-future of the *Nostromo* to the cold industrialism of Hadley's Hope – as the film moves between the twin structures that make up the

GREAT EGG-SPECTATIONS

PRIOR TO PRODUCTION, ALVAREZ SPOKE AT LENGTH WITH JAMES CAMERON. HERE'S WHAT WENT DOWN...

'Cameron loved *Don't Breathe*. I think Stephen Lang showed it to him while shooting *Avatar*. So Cameron invited me to the set of *Avatar 2* just to show me all the technology. Four years later I was having a discussion with my co-writer Rodo [Sayagues] about what does Hudson mean by a "bug hunt" [in *Aliens*]? Does he mean that the Colonial Marines met some sort of alien life before? So I was like, "Well, I'll just ask the writer." I sent Jim an email, and he was thrilled to know that I was doing Alien. He was like, "Let's talk all about it."

'We had a long chat. At first, he was telling me a lot of what I wanted to hear. I had a lot of questions about him making *Aliens*, and all the challenges of going after Ridley's movie. It was a beautiful conversation. When we were talking about the story concepts, everything Cameron says is a golden nugget. He has such a scientific brain. I remember saying, "Does it make sense that a planet would have a dark side all the time?" He was like, "Absolutely. Actually, that's more common. Earth is very special..."

'But he was also talking about the engines of the ships, and if the engine is too big for the size of the ship, or too little. It's stuff like that. The spaces, the scope, the science fiction, the technology, the weapons – it was very focused on that, which I loved. He said, "I haven't done this in a long time, just sit down and brainstorm a horror-action thriller," a wild brainstorming of ideas in the Alien universe. And we had the privilege to do it with him and with Ridley. So what else would you want?' **JF**

While presenting something new, *Romulus* also taps into the heritage of its predecessors

Isabela Merced plays Kay

Director Fede Alvarez promises plenty of xeno-action, including some surprises

Renaissance space station: Romulus and Remus. And speaking of the gargantuan *Renaissance*, even that was built for real. 'We had Ian Hunter, who worked on *Total Recall* and *Interstellar*, build all the spaceships,' Alvarez grins. 'He's one of the last great masters of miniatures. What you see in the trailer is an ILM shot, but it was built by hand by Ian Hunter, and it was scanned, and turned into a CG asset. So it always has that handmade texture.'

But nowhere is Alvarez's commitment to 'practical where possible' more evident than with the film's acid-blooded menagerie, the director claiming that 'all the creatures were built, and they worked'. Bluntly citing a desire to move away from the 'jumpy ninja shit' that an all-CG xeno allows for, Alvarez assembled a dream team of collaborators, including Shane Mahan and Alec Gillis – special-effects veterans who worked on *Aliens* early in their careers. In the face of financial sense, which dictates that one company handle all the work at a discounted rate, Alvarez split the labour: Mahan's Legacy Effects was responsible for all xenomorph matters, Gillis' Studio Gillis worked on chestburster and egg effects, and Richard Taylor's team at Weta Workshop handled the concept design of the facehuggers and weapons manufacturing.

'THE MOVIE SHOULD NEVER WAKE YOU UP FROM THE DREAM'

FEDE ALVAREZ

'We had an R.C. facehugger that you could drive around,' Alvarez recalls with a smile. 'I could chase people around. You'd see it coming, and it looks so fucking real – it was the scariest shit ever. [laughs] We had an animatronic xenomorph as well. Shane built the Queen on *Aliens* and said, half-jokingly: "This time we're going to get it right." Because all these years he's been thinking about the things he could have done better with the Queen, and how it didn't quite work.'

Admitting that 'it's way easier to just put up a tennis ball, and sometimes people can't tell it's CG', Alvarez – who has a background in visual effects and had no qualms about using CGI where it would make for a better shot – insisted on practical for 'close-up interactions'

The bond between Cailee Spaeny's Rain and David Jonsson's Andy is at the heart of the film

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where 'nothing beats the real thing'. Animatronic technology has also evolved exponentially since the mid-80s, meaning that the mechanical xenomorph 'could do a lot of things – it could move fast', according to Alvarez, who also hints at unseen creatures to come.

'There's other things I cannot tell you about because it'd be a spoiler – and actually it's what I'm most proud of,' he teases. 'There's a thing in the movie that still, today, is the most fantastical thing I saw that's part of the creature effects. Every time I watch it in the movie, it almost makes you think that it's CG because it's so out there. But it's not. It's 100% practical.'

Sometimes, the solutions were pleasingly old-school. 'We also had a guy in a suit,' Alvarez notes, with pride. 'You know, sometimes the guy in a suit works perfectly well, and we needed that. There was even a moment where we had a small creature that we needed to do something. I thought it would be great for stop-motion animation, and we brought Phil Tippett in to do it. And Phil was thrilled to do it.'

When CGI did prove necessary 'for scope', shots were carefully conceived to be consistent with the film's tangible special effects. 'We made sure that the CG was built in a way as if it were a practical element so the creatures moved more like an animatronic than a CG creature,' Alvarez points out. The director insists it was necessary to go 'above and beyond' in this way, even at the expense of a far more challenging and technical shoot, in service of an experience where immersion for the audience is never broken.

'When you watch the movie, it should never wake you up from the dream,' Alvarez opines. 'You should believe you're on a spaceship, surrounded by these creatures, and everything feels real, and there's nothing that takes you out of it and makes you think, "That's got to be fake." That is definitely the goal.'

Alien: Romulus focuses on 20-something characters facing a fight for survival

Calling the shots: Director Fede Alvarez on set

FEAR FACTOR

For the cast, the presence of facehuggers, chestbursters and xenomorphs on all-encompassing sets may not have helped with their stress levels, but it made for a far more visceral and immediate shoot. 'Fede really insisted on us feeling the full spectrum of fear,' Merced recalls. 'I actually don't think the feeling ever got old of seeing a xenomorph in person and up close like that. It really shocked you every time, and sent a chill running up your spine. The details are so amazing.'

'When you're watching *Jurassic Park* or *Alien* or *Tremors* – that tangible puppet that is there, brings the film to life, in my opinion,' says Spaeny. 'And maybe that's just me, coming from an actor's perspective. But I hope that audiences will really understand why Fede fought for that, and that it actually does make a difference.'

Alvarez also returned to *Alien*'s playbook in one other crucial respect – the design of the xenomorph, which is almost entirely consistent with H.R. Giger's iconic biomechancial vision. Even the domed head, which James Cameron removed for *Aliens* (see boxout, below), has been reinstated. 'It is pretty faithful,' says Alvarez. 'We're really trying to take the designs back to the original concept. We do embrace the biomechanical aspects of the creatures that were abandoned at one point. There is something about that that I find fascinating and scarier than if it's just an organic creature.'

'YOU CAN DEFINITELY SAY GOODBYE TO A 12A. IF YOU'RE GOING TO TRY TO SCARE PEOPLE, THEN YOU SCARE THEM'

DAVID JONSSON

As well as 'really trying to embrace the original concepts as close as possible', Alvarez sought to ground the violence in a way befitting of a modern horror movie. Take the film's extraordinarily gnarly chestburster scene, which Alvarez equates to the most violent segment of *Planet Earth* never aired.

'It is done almost like a nature documentary,' he says of a sequence which required nine puppeteers to achieve. 'While we were seeing it on set we were joking, and trying to narrate it like Attenborough would. "The creature is coming out slow. It's looking for the scent of the mother…" The creature's not trying to be scary. The creature is trying to get the fuck out of that cocoon, that happens to be a person. It's almost like this is more realistic in a way, but without betraying all the beautiful things of the original designs.'

'I really do believe that there are specific sequences in this film that will scar some kids that sneak into the movie for life,' claims Merced, who got a very up-close-and-personal view of one such sequence. 'You can definitely say goodbye to a 12A,' Jonsson adds with a hearty laugh. 'The halfway house with Fede is just not his style. If you're going to try to scare people, then you scare them.'

'He doesn't know how to not put that spin on it,' Spaeny notes, referencing *Don't Breathe* and his (literally) visceral reimagining of *Evil Dead*. 'That is just his instinct. He's waiting to do something strange and twisted. And you know he's got it when you're right on the edge of going, "Should we do this?" That's when you know, "OK, Fede is in his sweet spot."'

For Alvarez, the lofty goal with *Alien: Romulus* is to replicate the impact that the original film, and in particular the chestburster sequence, had on unsuspecting audiences in 1979 – no easy feat at a time when unimaginable horrors are part of an everyday

ALIEN EVOLUTION

TRACKING THE XENOMORPH'S LIFE CYCLE, FILM BY FILM.

PROMETHEUS (2012)
Other than a puzzling appearance on a mural, the traditional xeno doesn't appear in Ridley Scott's first prequel. Instead, we get the Aethon/Deacon, born from the union of a tentacled Trilobite and an Engineer. Key features include a fully organic appearance, a goblin shark-style protrusible jaw and the fact it bursts out, almost fully grown, using the back of its pointed head.

ALIEN: COVENANT (2017)
As well as the back-bursting, throat-erupting Neomorph – a translucent-skinned, more humanoid beast with fangs but no second jaw – *Covenant* introduces the Praetomorph, a creature engineered by David. Missing most biomechanical features, and born in miniature (adorable), it's otherwise a close cousin of the xeno we know and, er, love.

ALIEN (1979)
'Kane's son', as Ash puts it (Daddy must be so proud…), is Swiss artist H.R. Giger's brainchild, featuring a near-transparent domed head, dorsal tubes, pharyngeal jaw and towering bipedal stance. Technically a common Drone, condoms, bottle caps and cooling tubes from a Rolls-Royce were incorporated into the suit to enhance the biomechanical nightmare.

ALIENS (1986)
As well as doing away with the dome for its Warrior xenos, replacing the head with a ridged cranium, James Cameron made minor tweaks to the hands, feet and spiked tail to give the xeno a more animalistic appearance. The Cameron-designed Queen is a whole different beast entirely, with a massive fanned head, structured double jaw, double-jointed legs and more.

ALIEN³ (1992)
Depending on your cut of choice – theatrical or assembly – *Alien*³'s Runner/Dragon has very different origins – hosted by a dog or oxen. As a quadruped it's far faster, is missing the dorsal tubes but reinstates the domed head, and has eerie lips, at director David Fincher's request. A webbed-clawed, Queen-spawning Royal Facehugger also appears in the assembly cut.

ALIEN: RESURRECTION (1997)
Other than dark brown skin and copious quantities of slime, the *Auriga* xenos only slightly alter the Giger/Cameron designs. The major changes come with the pale-skinned Newborn – a massive xeno hybrid with human features (including a horrifying/hilarious pointy nose). Practical genitals were built at Jean-Pierre Jeunet's request, but removed with VFX. **JF**

MURRAY CLOSE, DISNEY/20TH CENTURY STUDIOS, ALAMY

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Practical creature design has been a priority – as has a return to Giger's original look

doomscroll. 'When you're young, you just feel so jealous about those stories. You're like, "Oh, man, I wish I could have been there the day no one expected it and the theatre went nuts,"' Alvarez says. 'So you want to make sure that it delivers on that promise, that you'll have people commenting on similar things to their friends, like, "Oof, that scene, man. I was there when it happened. *I saw it.*"'

MYTH MAKING

Part of *Alien*'s mystique has always been its hints at a wider mythology – including the mysterious Space Jockey and its derelict ship – that were left unexplained… until *Prometheus* and *Covenant* provided answers no one really understood, let alone wanted. Perhaps pointedly, Alvarez claims 'there's not time to dwell on philosophy too much in this movie. The pace is so different. When you're running for your life in this very raw, survival-horror way, there's just no time to go there', before acknowledging that there will be organic 'connections' to every Alien movie, and even nods to extended universe stories including comics, books and games. 'It is there for the audience that is looking for it.'

The film's subtitle itself is the clearest indicator to expect more than a simple scare machine. Tying into Weyland-Yutani's 'obsession with imperialist iconography', it is referencing the creation myth of Rome by Romulus and Remus – siblings suckled by a she-wolf before Romulus committed fratricide on his twin brother. 'It's one of my favourite parts of the movie, the mystery of "What's beyond being chased by a creature?"' Alvarez says cryptically, revealing only that the *Renaissance* is a research station where xeno-experimentation was taking place, and that the title is 'directly related to something Weyland-Yutani is doing in the story this time'.

It all points to an Alien movie that is simultaneously familiar, while having something strikingly different to offer. 'It's a completely new take on it – like a really, completely new take on it – to the point that it's actually a little bit scary,' says Jonsson. 'As much as it is an homage to the original,' adds Merced, 'I feel that Fede, as a fan, knew he wanted to see new things, and wanted to be the one to introduce them to the Alien world.'

But as Spaeny points out, first and foremost *Romulus* is a love letter to the series' two defining instalments. 'It was so much fun to, timeline-wise, place our story between one and two,' the star says with a grin. 'As a fan, you're able to connect the dots. So hopefully people can watch *Alien*, and then *Alien: Romulus*, and then *Aliens*. And that will be a satisfying thing.' The question of 'what do you prefer?' could soon get a lot more complicated.

'YOU WANT TO HAVE PEOPLE COMMENTING TO THEIR FRIENDS, "OOF, THAT SCENE, MAN! *I SAW IT*…"'

FEDE ALVAREZ

ALIEN: ROMULUS OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 16 AUGUST.

Cailee Spaeny stars as '*Romulus*' Ripley', Rain Carradine

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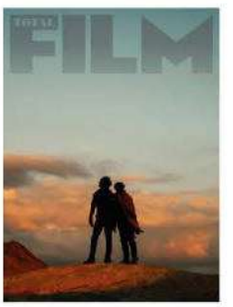
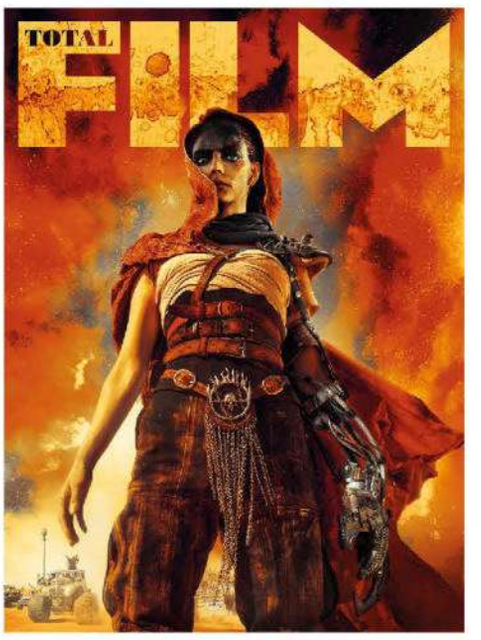

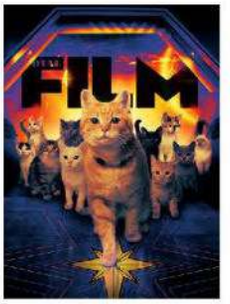

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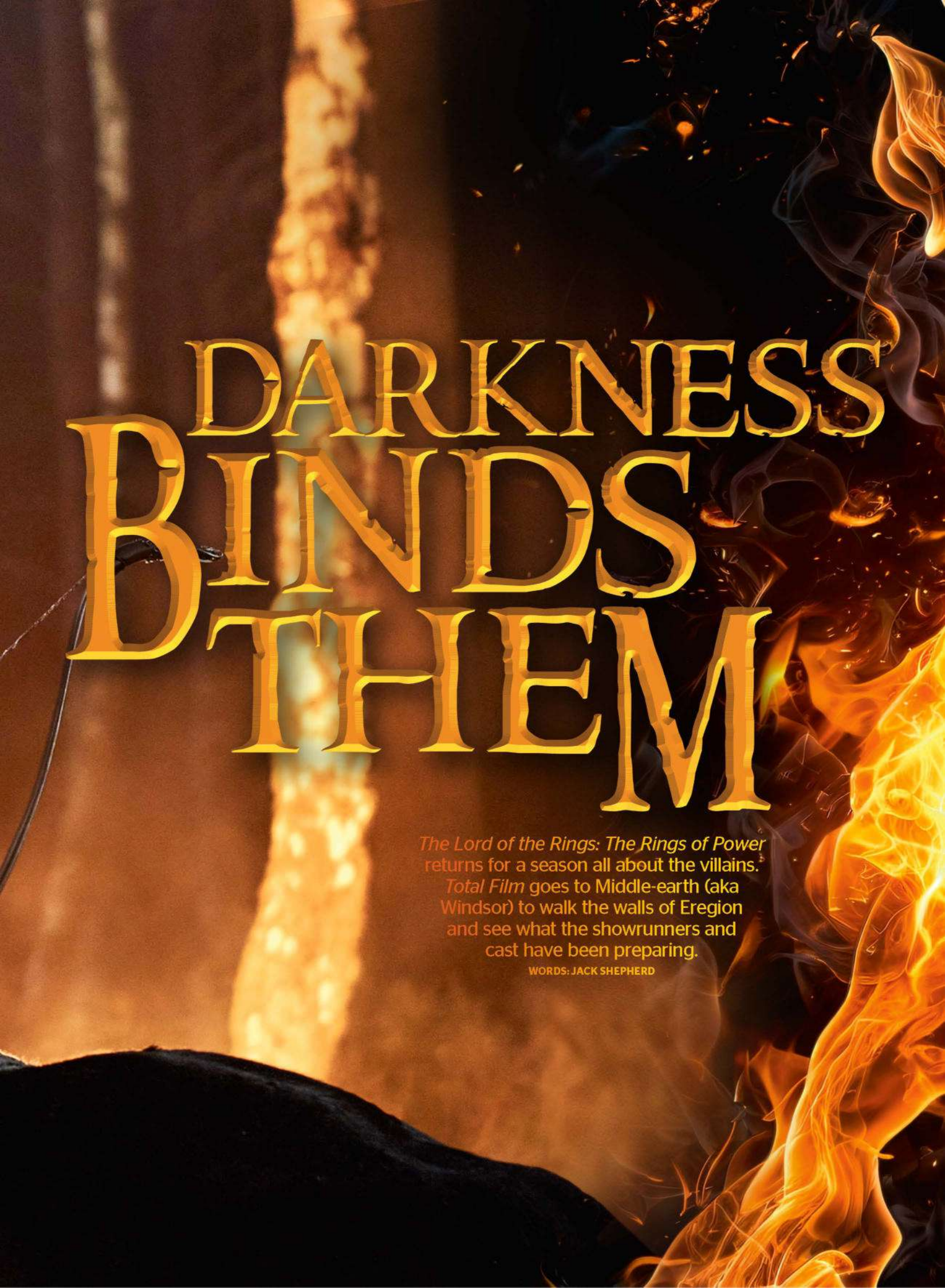


DARKNESS BINDS THEM

The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power returns for a season all about the villains. *Total Film* goes to Middle-earth (aka Windsor) to walk the walls of Eregion and see what the showrunners and cast have been preparing.

WORDS: JACK SHEPHERD

In the land of Mordor where the shadows lie, evil has risen. Sauron, formerly Halbrand, walks upon the ashen mountains of Middle-earth having recently unveiled himself to Galadriel, while Adar, the father of orcs, regroups with his children. Yet darkness has spread far beyond Mordor's dreaded borders: in Khazad-dûm, the caves are crumbling; across the sea, Númenor faces civil war; and in Lindon, the light of the elves dims. This is where the first season of *The Rings of Power* – the prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, bringing the Second Age of J.R.R. Tolkien's mythos to life – ended, but not where the follow-up begins.

'Do you want to hear the opening?' an excited Patrick McKay, co-showrunner with J.D. Payne, asks *Total Film*. It's a cold morning in April 2023 and we've just witnessed the filming of a monumental battle between orcs and elves outside the walls of Eregion (more on that later). We have now parked ourselves somewhere a little warmer, inside Bray Studios, near Windsor, to hear what the showrunners have been filming.

'We open in the darkness, an orc walks in, and we see there are thousands of orcs gathered,' McKay says. It is the end of the First Age, Morgoth has been defeated, and Sauron demands fealty from his followers. 'He's about to be crowned, pitching his vision of Middle-earth, and right before they lay the crown on his head, his right-hand man, Adar, turns it upside down, and stabs him in the back. It's the assassination of Sauron.'

It's a bold opening that sets the tone for what's to come. 'Right from the beginning, Sauron [played by Charlie Vickers] is the centre of gravity,' McKay says when we catch up a year later. 'It's an ensemble show, but the focus is starting to get pulled towards him. He's driving everything.'

As a result, Galadriel, last season's primary lead, shares the spotlight. For actor Morfydd Clark, though, there was still lots to do. 'There's always about three things filming at once,' she says, echoing executive producer Lindsey Weber's claim that *The Rings of Power* is the only show shooting three units simultaneously. 'And as a nerd for it myself,' Clark continues, 'it's so fun to find out more about these other characters.'

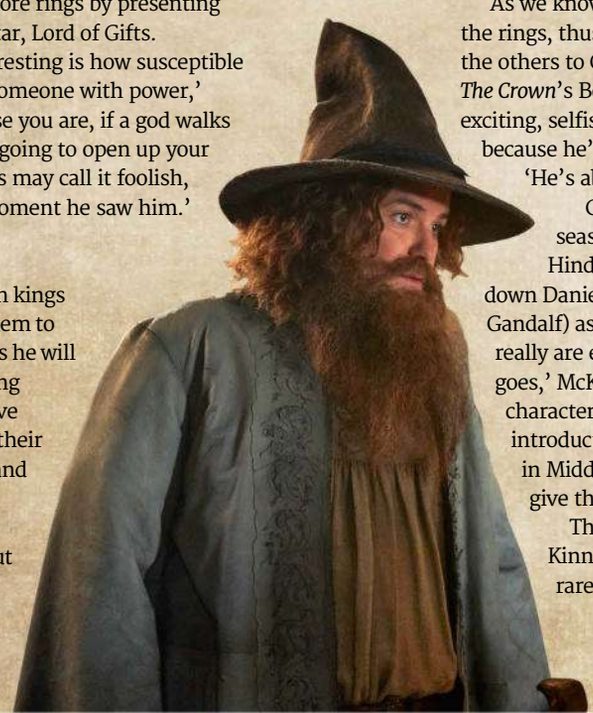
After spending a season hidden from sight, Sauron's return impacts the lives of every race: dwarf, harfoot, elf, man and orc. But perhaps more than anyone, the Dark Lord's comeback puts the show's spotlight on Celebrimbor, the Elven smith played by Charles Edwards. When Sauron returns to Eregion, he essentially gaslights Celebrimbor into making more rings by presenting himself not as Halbrand but as Annatar, Lord of Gifts.

'What makes Celebrimbor so interesting is how susceptible he is not only to flattery but also to someone with power,' Edwards says. 'Regardless of how wise you are, if a god walks into your living room and says, "I'm going to open up your world view," you go with it. Outsiders may call it foolish, but Sauron cast a spell on him the moment he saw him.'

ELF DISCOVERY

But what of those three rings for elven kings forged last season? Elrond's taking them to Lindon's leader Gil-galad in the hopes he will destroy them, while Galadriel's chasing Elrond, wanting to use the rings to save their kin. 'Conflict has been a part of their relationship but it's more overt now and operates in a different way,' Robert Aramayo, who plays Elrond, says. 'It makes it complicated as he cares about her, he loves her. It's really complex.'

Behind the scenes with Charles Edwards (Celebrimbor). Below: Rory Kinnear debuts as fan favourite Tom Bombadil



'IT WAS THE OPPORTUNITY, NOT OF ONE LIFETIME, BUT MANY LIFETIMES, TO WRITE TOM BOMBADIL'

J.D. PAYNE

As we know from Tolkien's work, Gil-galad chooses to use the rings, thus keeping the elves in Middle-earth, and gifts the others to Galadriel and Círdan, a new character played by *The Crown*'s Ben Daniels. Círdan is a mentor to Elrond. 'It was exciting, selfishly, to be a part of that character's introduction, because he's such an amazing character,' Aramayo continues. 'He's absolutely fascinating and so unique.'

Círdan is one of many new faces introduced this season. One of the best-known newcomers is Ciarán Hinds, who portrays a mysterious wizard hunting down Daniel Weyman's other wizard (long suspected to be Gandalf) as he traverses the desert landscape of Rhûn. 'We really are excited for the audience to see where that journey goes,' McKay teases without giving anything about the character away. They instead point out that Rhûn's introduction marks the first time we've seen deserts in Middle-earth. They were filmed in Tenerife and give the show a *Lawrence of Arabia* feel.

The showrunners are more open to discussing Rory Kinnear's Tom Bombadil, the jolly immortal who has rarely been adapted for the screen despite appearing

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Arondir (Ismael Cruz Córdova) and Isildur (Maxim Baldry)

Sam Hazeldine as fallen elf Adar (left)

in Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Bombadil becomes a companion on The Stranger's quest to find his own identity.

'It was the opportunity, not of one lifetime, but many lifetimes, to write Tom Bombadil,' says Payne. A quarter of the character's dialogue comes straight from the books, and the writers meticulously researched how Tolkien adapted Anglo-Saxon verse to create the rest. 'One of the moments I love best about this season is when The Stranger asks, "Who are you?" And Bombadil just says, "Eldest." He's wacky and sings songs, but when he says that, you get this sense of, "Oh, he's been around for thousands of years."'

'For The Stranger, when he comes across Tom, his brain is being expanded,' adds Weyman. 'There's an expansion of understanding and time and what that means for him. It was a lovely way for us to explore what it means to be a character who actually knows about the singing-into-being of the universe, the years of the trees. That's really fascinating.'

Production on the series moved from New Zealand to the UK, which led to VFX artist Jason Smith coming aboard the series. He was asked by the showrunners what he wanted to see more of. 'Creatures,' he answered, and his wish was granted: the new season features Barrow Whites, Ents, Eagles, a few familiar water creatures, and a certain spider.

Smith emphasises capturing things in-camera. For the Barrow Whites – terrifying, ghastly white creatures – they used contortionists who could pop bones out of place. 'We were watching them work like, "How can this be real?"' Clark says. 'We barely had to do any of the green-screen imagining stuff.'

Isildur, last seen M.I.A. after being defeated in battle, makes his grand return to the show stuck in a spider's web. 'That was a wet, muddy set, and a lot of it was done for real,' says Maxim Baldry, who plays the future King of Gondor. 'There were these spider-lings done with a puppet master. I watched it on a monitor and couldn't believe it wasn't CGI.'

ORC THIS WAY

Total Film witnesses some of the show's in-camera magic first-hand. Hidden away in a British forest west of London, not unlike the forests that inspired Tolkien's work, there's a huge tent, and inside are hundreds of orcs getting their hair done. It takes two and a half hours to prepare just one of these gruesome beasts, with fresh prosthetics being created every day. One artist says over 1,500 pairs of ears have been made. An orc sips a green smoothie through a straw as they wait for their paint to dry.

As *TF* steps outside, an opening in the forest and the huge stone wall of a castle, first constructed in December, dominate the view. The flags of Eregion blow in the wind while dead Elves are scattered across the treacherous landscape. In the distance, a half-dozen mammoth trebuchets are hidden in the trees. The orcs – no health drinks in hand – are midway through the battle, tearing someone apart, and they look utterly vicious.

'Those orcs are very effective when they're running around all frightening and angry,' says Clark when we meet again in

CHARLIE VICKERS

CASTING AN EYE OVER SAURON

How different was playing Halbrand/Sauron this season?
I had an absolute blast. It was me and Charlie [Edwards] working in a room, doing everything in sequence. But man, after a whole year of hiding secrets, and then a whole press tour of hiding secrets, I just enjoyed being Sauron and not having to hide stuff. This season, we get to be with Sauron; you're seeing him being Sauron. In Season 1, where Halbrand would have turned away and had some Sauron moments privately, now the camera stays with him.

How was playing the elf Annatar compared to Halbrand?
It's such a process, developing a whole new look, a new voice, a new way of moving. The most important thing was finding a throughline that connects the two characters because they're both Sauron. I didn't want complete opposites. The throughline was that Halbrand was a creation for Galadriel in that he gave her everything that she needed and was able to worm his way inside her mind. Everything about Annatar was for Celebrimbor; the way he looks and talks and the sense of stillness. Celebrimbor is world-famous, at the peak of his craft, so to command his attention there had to be a sense of wisdom and weight and gravitas in the voice and the movement of the character.

What's his relationship like with Adar this season?
I love the whole idea of the villain of the first season meeting the bigger villain. Like Palpatine has rolled into the conversation. You get to see their history; there's more backstory and an understanding of their relationship. When Sauron and Adar meet face to face again, there's this beautiful monologue talking about corruption. It sets the scene for the whole season. In the same way that Sauron ends up manipulating Celebrimbor, it sets the chessboard in motion with Adar. **JS**

the less-muddy comfort of a London hotel. 'Even though you know [they're just actors], I always have one take where I'm just [makes a scared noise] because it's so effective.'

The battle of Eregion will be this season's major centrepiece as the orcs march on the elven realm. 'We really wanted to be disciplined with Season 1, knowing that Season 2 would lead into Sauron essentially bringing an army of orcs to Eregion to claim the rings,' says Payne. 'That by necessity means you're dealing with vast armies, and you're dealing with multiple armies, you're dealing with orcs and you're dealing with, at a certain point according to canon, the dwarves. We know Elrond is going to become involved.

'By nature, it has to be a much grander, bigger battle,' Payne continues. 'But we never want to get into battle fatigue, armies clashing, and it's anonymous. It's all about the emotional impact. The seventh episode of this season is something else.'

The battle is only a part of the show's rich tapestry, the show fully embracing its ensemble nature, the showrunners' inspired by the way *The Wire* reintroduced characters across multiple episodes each season. And thanks to this being a sprawling TV series, each story strand – whether dwarven or Númenorian – is given room to breathe, leading to some unexpected turns.

For instance, when we meet the dwarves again, Durin IV (Owain Arthur), having been disowned by his kingly father, and his wife, Disa (Sophia Nomvete), are worrying about money. They talk about tightening their purse strings while bargaining for food at a market. It's a conversation unlike anything else we've heard in Middle-earth. Meanwhile, in Adar's encampment, there's a female orc with what appears to be a baby.

'There were little hints in Season 1 of where we wanted the show to go tonally,' says McKay. 'The later episodes really

Elrond (Robert Aramayo) must repel an orc army as Season 2 ramps up

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Ismael Cruz Córdova (Arondir), Maxim Baldry (Isildur) and new co-star Nia Towle as Estrid

established this darker, more grounded tone.' He points to how director Charlotte Brändström, who helmed episodes six and seven, and returns for four episodes this season, found a sweet spot delivering a fantastical show that lets you sink into its world. 'There's greater depth with the characters and what they're all grappling with and how they're motivated.'

That orc with the baby ('*Allegedly* an orc baby,' corrects McKay, 'it's never actually on screen, though you sure hear something that sounds like it might be [a baby]') goes on to have a surprisingly important role in the series. 'He's questioning the motives of his orc father,' says McKay. 'This orc asks, "Why do we have to go to war again when we have this homeland [in Mordor]?" He's an Orc with an arc.'

It's not only an orc who's getting a Tolkien-ien redemptive story. 'The villains often have something redemptive at their centre, even Sauron,' McKay says. 'In his own twisted way, he thinks he's healing Middle-earth… There's an earnestness to stories in Middle-earth and we happily embrace that.'

POWER MOVES

Back on set, *Total Film* notices a collection of particularly interesting props, some of the 10,000-plus individual items made for the second season. The production team walks us around the throne room of Númenor – an exquisite, gigantic room, where every detail has been meticulously crafted – where they have laid out a few tables covered in jewellery. Indeed, there are a few precious rings on display.

This season, of course, brings us one step closer to the events of the main *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, and certain characters are becoming more like their older counterparts. For Isildur, this season's about going from 'boyhood to manhood', as Baldry puts it, while Elrond and Galadriel both have scenes that echo their movie selves. 'History does repeat itself,' teases Clark, while Aramayo adds: 'The show started in the Golden Age of the elves and things are becoming more Third Age-y.'

At some point this season, Galadriel gives in to temptation and accepts an elven ring despite knowing Sauron's part in forging it. The moment directly mirrors her temptation in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. 'That's the first breadcrumb on the trail of this entire show,' the showrunners say of the original *Fellowship* scene. 'You should be believing she could be an absolute hero and totally good, and at the same time, she has a serious Achilles heel of pride and weakness and vanity and lust for power.'

We will have to wait another three seasons to see Clark's Galadriel fully become like Cate Blanchett's version, as the showrunners are sticking to their initial pitch: 'This was always the plan, to continue telling this five-season story… We have all kinds of ideas for the third and the fourth and the fifth. But, there's a long road ahead.'

And moving forward, they won't be the only ones in the Tolkien business: Peter Jackson is producing a new film, *The Hunt for Gollum*, with Andy Serkis directing. 'Tolkien's world is so vast that it could support 100 shows and movies, and still only scratch the surface,' Payne says. 'This was the man's life work and there are over 9,000 years of history, a dozen in-world languages. You could do the Beren and Lúthien show if you wanted to. Go down any corridor and there's a story there. We're glad there are more stories in Middle-earth being told.'

'And we're staying in our lane,' adds McKay. 'We have a 50-hour epic that we're only 16 hours into crafting, and we're seeing it through.'

Evil has risen in Middle-earth and we've only just started exploring it.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RINGS OF POWER SEASON 2 STREAMS ON PRIME VIDEO FROM 29 AUGUST.

'THE SHOW STARTED IN THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE ELVES AND THINGS ARE BECOMING MORE THIRD AGE-Y'

ROBERT ARAMAYO

ROSS FERGUSON, PRIME VIDEO

Paradise COST

A tech billionaire's private island is the setting for *Blink Twice*, a provocative thriller from Zoë Kravitz. *Total Film* accepts an invitation to learn about how the first-time director and stars Channing Tatum and Naomi Ackie are tackling power dynamics head on.

WORDS: KIM TAYLOR-FOSTER

Zoë

Kravitz's directorial debut, *Blink Twice*, revolves around a billionaire jetting off with friends and a group of young women (and a man) to the lush environs of his privately owned paradise. When events take a turn, one island-goer, Frida (Naomi Ackie), starts to question her reality.

Kravitz also co-wrote the screenplay (with E.T. Feigenbaum) – originally titled *Pussy Island* – starting in 2017 and did not draw on any real-life events on the subject of billionaires and private islands. It was, however, the year of #MeToo, and things were coming to a head.

'It was really more about power dynamics,' explains Kravitz. 'And trying to create a situation where the characters were isolated. That, in my mind, is the scariest situation you could be in – whether you're trapped in the back of a car, in a closet, or in a dark room at a party. À la *Lord of the Flies*, I was trying to find an environment where the characters had to stay and deal with the crumbling of the power dynamics.'

Another source of inspiration was the environment she grew up orbiting, as the daughter of two high-profile figures in entertainment, Lenny Kravitz and Lisa Bonet. 'I grew up in rooms with powerful people in them from a young age,' she says. 'So I was the fly on the wall for a long time, witnessing this thing I didn't necessarily understand. I had the power and the privilege to not be in a situation where I was afraid of being kicked out of these spaces, which is rare. That's where the power dynamic comes into play – you play by the rules, or you don't get invited back. I got to really sit back and watch the game at play. But at the end of the day, we're all women living in the world, and it's dangerous and things happen to everybody all the time, sadly.'

The fictional tech billionaire of *Blink Twice* is Slater King; Channing Tatum playing against type. Outed for inappropriate behaviour, King has publicly apologised and sought therapy. A charmer, he sweeps Frida off her feet at an annual bash where she's hostessing.

'It's the first time I've ever played anyone [like this],' Tatum tells *Total Film*. 'Every character I play, I usually have some sort of love for or a connection to.' With Slater King, that approach was out of reach. 'I don't think I'll ever tell anybody what I had to create inside my head to play this person. He's a psychopath.'

Naomi Ackie's Frida becomes enthralled by a wealthy entrepreneur

'To get sucked into this fantasy of a vacation was the key'
ZOË KRAVITZ

Channing Tatum's Slater King has been accused of reprehensible behaviour

TROPICAL STORM

Blink Twice traverses dark territory, but it's also funny and entertaining – doubly impactful because of it. 'It's a really hard subject but you find yourself having a good time, which is interesting… You find yourself almost feeling bad that you're actually having a good time in this movie,' says Tatum. He calls the film a Trojan Horse – the entertainment factor being a vehicle for carrying some serious messages. 'It's like giving you sugar to make the medicine go down. You've been taken on a journey of making you actually think about things, but also had a good time doing it.'

Making it fun is key to stopping us judging Frida and her friend, Jess (Alia Shawkat), for going along for the ride. '[Frida] is a person with a big personality who's really tired of being ignored, and is just trying to find her way into the next stage of her life,' explains Kravitz. 'She meets Slater King, who has all this money and opportunity, and people respect him. She's really attracted to that lifestyle and yearns to be that kind of person.'

It's easy to understand the pull. And once she's island-bound, cordiality soon gives way to hedonism for an irresistible heady mix. By the time the tone switches, it's too late, and a shocking transformation in King rocks the audience almost as much as Frida.

'When I wrote [Slater King], I was trying to find somebody who would be surprising,' says Kravitz. Seeking an actor who elicited instant trust led her to Tatum. 'That's why Chan has been cast in so many romantic roles – women feel comfortable around him. It's because he really does love women. He really is a feminist – he has a daughter, he's a wonderful father.'

Making it all the harder for a man like Channing Tatum to inhabit the role. Says Kravitz, 'He really did an actor's job, which is to try to understand the character in a real way [so] that you're not playing someone from the outside in; you're playing someone from the inside out. Whatever he had to do to justify it, to make the scenes work, he did it. And you can see the work when you watch [the film].'

Slater King's court of rich island cohorts include characters

Director Zoë Kravitz wanted to create an upbeat atmosphere – at least to begin with…

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The gang's trip to the island begins with fun, but events spiral out of control

played by Kyle MacLachlan, Haley Joel Osment and Christian Slater – all actors with likeable personas. 'It was important to create a group of friends the audience wanted to hang out with, that *I* wanted to hang out with,' says Kravitz. 'If you're on vacation with a bunch of people who make you feel uncomfortable, you're wondering why you're there in the first place. To get sucked into this fantasy of a vacation was the key to the story.'

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

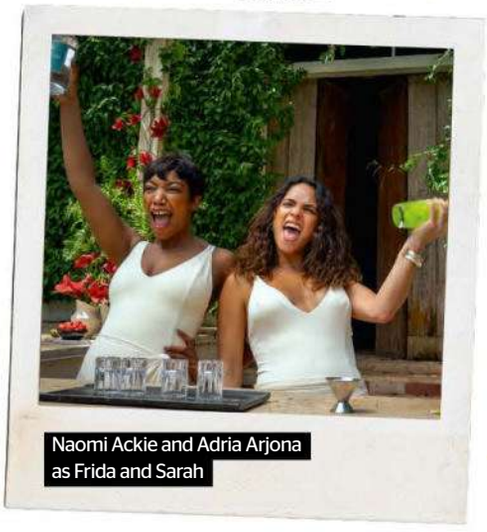
So what about Frida? Kravitz originally penned the character from her own perspective, with a view to perhaps playing the role herself. She eventually realised she wasn't right for it. What made Naomi Ackie – known for playing Whitney Houston in 2022 biopic *I Wanna Dance with Somebody* – the perfect choice?

'It's a really complicated part,' says Kravitz. 'It's a tightrope balance of drama and comedy, and innocence and devilishness. It's so many things at once. [Ackie] can really layer all those things in a way that I haven't seen many actors do, and does it with such ease.'

Kravitz uses close-ups to great effect in the film, often trained on Ackie's features. Capturing micro-expressions, Kravitz creates a sense of unease and magnifies the character's perceived realness. She does the same for the other women on screen, not least Adria Arjona's character. Like real women, Kravitz's female characters 'get to be funny, and get to be messy, and get to be all the things'. They also look real, with sweat and real skin texture and so on, on show.

'There are some movies where we see women and you're like, "You're running around and you still look like a model. Tell me how!" It wasn't that, this is realistic,' Ackie tells *Total Film* over Zoom, speaking from her Islington home. She's just back from holiday in Mexico where the film was coincidentally shot (Yucatán stood in for the island in the movie). She's dressed casually in a black hoodie. 'Our whole point is being truthful… I think it was a goal of Zoë's just to keep us honest; keep us rounded.'

> 'I was like, "Well, if I can play Whitney I can do literally anything".'
> NAOMI ACKIE



Naomi Ackie and Adria Arjona as Frida and Sarah

Ackie was working on *I Wanna Dance…* when she signed up for *Blink Twice*, emboldened by smashing the most intimidating role she's ever had ('I was like, "Well, if I can play Whitney Houston I can do literally anything"') and attracted by the contrast in character and tone of the new project.

'The theme of desperately wanting more than you have really appealed to me; playing someone who doesn't know their own strength, doesn't know their own power and admires someone else's was fascinating,' adds the actor. 'And I think it's a universal thing.'

Working with Kravitz, too, was a draw. 'She had done so much work,' says Ackie. 'She had written it over five years, and was very specific on what she wanted, how she wanted it, and in depth about it to all of us. So it was an amazing experience and a privilege to watch her do it for the first time because it came to her so naturally.'

EYES WIDE OPEN

Kravitz always wanted to direct, but hadn't taken the leap before. It took a passion project to change that. By the time they were ready to shoot in 2021, she'd become so attached to the film she didn't feel right passing it on to anybody else. 'I saw everything so clearly in my mind, I just didn't know how I could ever feel comfortable giving that responsibility to somebody else,' she says. 'And it's incredible, as someone who's been on movie sets my entire life, how little I actually knew about what it really takes to get a movie made.'

Kravitz and Tatum met on the film. The *Magic Mike* star had some directing experience under his belt with the film *Dog* (co-directed with Reid Carolin), although he's self-deprecating – 'I'm not really sure if I ever even directed a movie,' he says of the challenge of pulling double duty as director/star on that film. The process was hard. He and Kravitz share a similar first-timer outlook, but did he give her any advice? He prides himself on being a good sounding board for directors he's worked with, helping solve the kinds of problems all filmmakers face.

'He knew how he could be there for me, especially as a producer,' says Kravitz. 'He's a fantastic producer, and really great at thinking ahead and trying to protect me in certain ways, in protecting the vision. Learning what he's learned over his many years of producing, as well as directing *Dog*, he was able to be a great support system or one step ahead in terms of what I might need.'

If there's one thing Kravitz needs right now, it's for audiences to embrace and understand the film and its messages. With that in mind, the movie's original title, *Pussy Island*, was a barrier – hence the name change to *Blink Twice* – but also a conduit.

'When they tested the title, it was women that were most affected and felt like they wouldn't go see a film called *Pussy Island*,' says Kravitz. 'It's important that women feel comfortable to see this film. So I think it's complicated. The reason I wanted to use that word is the same reason I can't use it. [I'm] just trying to empower women and take that word back. Maybe once you see the film, then you understand it. Unfortunately, it's backwards. But I do believe that the spirit of the intention of that title is still in the film, and it was the seed that started everything. So, Pussy Island lives in my mind.'

One thing's for sure: whatever the title, the film will likewise live in viewers' minds for the foreseeable.

BLINK TWICE OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 23 AUGUST.

DOMESTIC DISTURBANCE

A chance encounter with a family on holiday becomes the stuff of nightmares in psychological thriller ***Speak No Evil***. *Total Film* talks to lead actor James McAvoy and director James Watkins about manners, mentors and mullets...

WORDS NEIL SMITH

tuck in the Middle with You by Stealers Wheel never sounded quite the same after Quentin Tarantino used it to accompany Michael Madsen's ear-slicing torture of a tied-up policeman in *Reservoir Dogs*. Anybody who saw the David Fincher version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, meanwhile, may feel Enya's *Orinoco Flow* was equally tainted when Stellan Skarsgård's Martin Vanger used it to soundtrack his shackling and suffocating of Daniel Craig's Mikael Blomkvist.

Thanks to James Watkins' latest, we can now add another track to the list of innocuous earworms mischievously used to score moments of menace and violence: The Bangles' 1989 chart-topper *Eternal Flame*. To reveal exactly how Susanna Hoffs' dulcet tones feature in the *Eden Lake* director's nail-biting remake of 2022 Danish thriller *Gæsterne* would be a spoiler too far. Suffice to say that, if *Speak No Evil* does its job properly, it won't be 'sun shines through the rain' you'll think of the next time you hear it.

Directed by Christian Tafdrup from a script he wrote with his brother Mads, *Gæsterne* – released abroad as *Speak No Evil* – told of a reserved couple from Denmark who are befriended by a couple from the Netherlands while on holiday in Italy. Invited to spend a weekend at their Dutch farmhouse, Bjørn and Louise (Morten Burian and Sidsel Siem Koch) warily accept only to discover that Patrick and Karin (Fedja van Huêt and Karina Smulders) are unconventional hosts with a secret agenda.

Premiering in January 2022 at the Sundance Film Festival, the film opened in Denmark that March and went on to be shortlisted for 11 Danish Film Awards. At some point along the way it caught the attention of Blumhouse's Couper Samuelson, who wondered whether Watkins was the man to adapt it for an English-speaking audience.

'Couper was an early adopter of *Eden Lake* and we have a shared sensibility,' says the English director, who scored a big hit in 2012 with Daniel Radcliffe-starring spookfest *The Woman in Black*. 'He said, "Take a look at this movie; it's pretty brutal." I watched it and thought I could have a really interesting conversation with Christian's film. There was something interesting in it I could explore and develop on my own terms.' Watkins agreed to sign on as writer and director, on the proviso the action be moved to England and that the Bjørn and Louise characters become American. 'Usually it's the Brits who are repressed and the Americans who are freewheeling, but that's not always been my experience,' he tells *Total Film*. 'There were things in the film I could get my teeth into and make a little bit more my own.'

James McAvoy stars as Paddy in the remake; (inset) Aisling Franciosi as Ciara

'PADDY CAN'T JUST BE BOORISH; HE HAS TO BE CHARMING, TWINKLY AND MERCURIAL'
JAMES WATKINS

Paddy demonstrates the delights of the great outdoors to his guests

COUPLE'S RETREAT

Having worked with Blumhouse himself on *Split* and *Glass*, the second and third parts of M. Night Shyamalan's Eastrail 177 trilogy, James McAvoy was just as happy to be the remake's Patrick (now Paddy) and to head an ensemble rounded out by Mackenzie Davis (*Terminator: Dark Fate*), Scoot McNairy (*Monsters*) and Aisling Franciosi (*The Nightingale*). 'I thought it was really fun and really fucking scary,' he says of Watkins' adaptation. (The Scottish star chose not to see the Danish original until the remake was completed.) 'But it was also an examination of modern life and how we relate to rules, manners and compliance. The best stuff that Blumhouse does, the stuff of theirs I love, is usually underpinned by social or sociological commentary. So this film ticked all the boxes: it entertained, shocked and scared and it was about something as well.'

When we first encounter Louise (Davis) and Ben (McNairy), they're a couple in crisis. Stymied at work and miserable at home, the vacation they are taking with 11-year-old daughter Agnes (Alix West Lefler) is a last-ditch attempt to salvage a relationship that has become, in McAvoy's words, 'an absolute pain in the arse'. Small wonder, then, that Paddy and Ciara (Franciosi) are a breath of fresh air, even if they do come with a sullen young lad (Dan Hough's Ant) who can't speak a word. 'Not only are they fun, but they seem to have it all figured out,' McAvoy continues. 'They're really intelligent, they have been together for years and are clearly having great sex. They invite Ben and Louise to their beautiful home in the countryside and it seems like a dream, like they've been invited to Hobbiton. Who wouldn't aspire to be like them, especially if you're in a relationship that's just getting by?'

'Ben is a guy who's a bit lost, and he sees this guy who's a bit unshackled,' Watkins elaborates. 'But there's a cautionary tale here. I don't need to mention any names, but when you look at the political world

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in America and the UK there are these demagogic figures who present themselves as against-the-system mentors who can solve all your problems. "Follow me," they say, "and I'll take you back to this untrammelled version of masculinity." It's a false, bullshit promise.' In one sequence, Paddy takes Ben to the top of a hill and has him scream with him as loud as he can to expel his anxieties. It was not, says McAvoy, his favourite scene to shoot. 'It was quite draining so I didn't enjoy it,' he tells *Total Film*. 'As I get older' – he is now 45 – 'when there's anything where I'm screaming, I'm always like, "God, I'm going to be knackered after that!"'

Dan Hough and Alix West Lefler as Ant and Agnes

'James is brilliant,' gushes Watkins, who knew from his namesake's British Independent Film Awards-winning performance in 2013's *Filth* that he'd be able to embody Paddy's many contradictions. 'He understands the nuance, the push and pull, the play, the game. Paddy can't just be boorish; he has to be charming and fun and twinkly and mercurial. James knew how to walk that line.' That McAvoy had been working out and bulking up prior to being cast turned out to be fortuitous. 'I had been eating a lot and lifting a lot of heavy weights so I happened to be a bit beefier,' the actor explains. 'I didn't do it for the role but it worked out perfectly, timing-wise.'

'He also had a slight hint of a mullet,' laughs Watkins, who felt the much-derided hairstyle suited Paddy's atavistic aesthetic.

'Basically I went for something that was a little bit bogan,' says McAvoy, referring to an Australian term for someone with low social status deemed uncultured and uncouth. 'I wanted him to wear shorts a lot and look like a farmer. Even though Paddy's a doctor, I wanted him to look like he had his hands in the soil every day. So we went for a kind of farmer chic, tinged with something modern and masculine that might be judged to be a little bit toxic.'

The idea, says Watkins, was to offer a clear contrast with Davis and McNairy's more buttoned-down characters, with Franciosi's Ciara serving as the conduit between them. 'James and Mackenzie are Alphas, Scoot is a bit more Beta, while Aisling is the secret weapon,' the director reveals. 'She's the one who brings a sort of softening and heart to their subterfuge.'

Director James Watkins with McAvoy on set

ORIGINAL SIN

As anyone who saw Tafdrup's film will attest, the first *Speak No Evil* ended on a note of almost *Funny Games*-level bleakness. 'Christian was really pushing the idea of how far people would comply, like an allegory almost,' says McAvoy. 'Our film is 100% a remake and it honours the original, but it also does something a little bit different.' Our chat is venturing into spoiler territory, so best stop reading now if you want your *Speak No Evil* experience uncompromised. It's not giving too much away, though, to observe that if the 2022 film echoed the works of Michael Haneke, the 2024 vintage isn't afraid to throw in a few surprises of its own. 'What I was quite minded to try and do is the gear shifts: the slow, incremental build so that one thing could become another,' says Watkins. 'It's like, "Jesus Christ" – you're in this situation. Do you run, do you hide, or do you try and fight back?'

Another aspect of Tafdrup's take that made it a tough watch for viewers was the way it depicted extreme violence against children. As much as Watkins admired the original, it wasn't an element he wanted to replicate. 'Our film is a lot less explicit,' he says. 'It's a psychological thriller with a horrific concept embedded in it, rather than a straight horror film. It's easy to get scares or shocks out of horrific actions. Since I've become a parent I guess I am more mindful of not just having clockwork horror.' For his part, McAvoy was keen to ensure the young actor cast as his on-screen son would not wind up in any way traumatised. 'I spoke with Dan and his parents and said, "If this gets uncomfortable for you at any point, just say, 'Stop'." But Dan was up for the play; he understood what acting is and the line between reality and fiction.'

Filmed in Croatia and Gloucestershire in summer last year, *Speak No Evil* was just five days away from completion when shooting was suspended by the SAG-AFTRA strike. (Lensing resumed in mid-November.) This, though, seems to have been the only bump in the road for an otherwise charmed production. 'It came together incredibly quickly,' nods Watkins, who is now busy writing another script. As for McAvoy, well, let's just say those shorts came in handy. 'We got to go to sunny Croatia and then film on a farm near Cheltenham in the middle of a sunny summer,' he remembers. 'It was gorgeous, a really nice shoot. I can't complain at all…'

SPEAK NO EVIL OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 12 SEPTEMBER.

The Nature of Evil

British folk horror *Starve Acre* brings together the stars of the two biggest fantasy shows on TV for a disturbing exploration of demonically fuelled grief. *Total Film* speaks to Matt Smith, Morfydd Clark and director Daniel Kokotajlo about a throwback horror of elemental proportions.

WORDS JORDAN FARLEY

Daniel Kokotajlo isn't wearing his influences on his sleeve, but they are on the wall. When *Total Film* hops on a Zoom call with the director and writer of upcoming throwback chiller *Starve Acre*, framed posters sit over each shoulder – *The Wicker Man*'s US one-sheet ('I prefer that over the UK one,' Kokotajlo muses) and a striking lino print of *Blood on Satan's Claw* by the artist Richard Wells, produced for a 2022 novelisation. 'I'm surrounded by folk-horror stuff,' the director says, looking to the left and right, as if still drawing dark power from the images. 'It's there for inspiration.'

Though adapted from a 2019 novel by Andrew Michael Hurley, *Starve Acre* feels like a lost artefact of the 1970s – something the enterprising manager of a fleapit cinema might programme on a double bill with *Witchfinder General*; a film that claws at your core and, deep down, feels born of something unnatural. 'That's what would scare me about watching those old 70s horrors,' says Kokotajlo, who grew up Jehovah's Witness – as explored in his stunning 2017 film *Apostasy* – and would 'purge' his VHS collection of horror movies every few months due to 'irritating religious guilt'. 'They were something that was unearthed and dirty and that you shouldn't be watching. I wanted that quality.'

Set in rural Yorkshire in the 70s, *Starve Acre* sees Morfydd Clark and Matt Smith star as Juliette and Richard, parents who must reckon with the death of their disturbed young son under somewhat mysterious circumstances. While mourning in their remote family home of Starve Acre, the distance growing ever greater between them, 'Jules' is visited by her sister, Harrie (Erin Richards), and lifted out of depression following a particularly fiery seance. Richard, meanwhile, is an archaeologist, and in grief turns to the land surrounding their home, beneath which he believes an ancient evil tied to his troubled childhood is waiting to be unearthed.

'Richard finds it terribly difficult to express himself, or express emotion, or to talk to his wife – obviously because of his own history,' says Smith, who fully dials down the explosive charisma of *House of the Dragon*'s Daemon Targaryen to play perhaps his most subdued and internalised character to date. 'There was something about that repression – that deep repression – that is interesting, and it weirdly feels like it's contained in the landscape of the film somehow. The landscape seems to be invading this tiny, little house.'

For Clark, soon to return to screens as Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* Season 2 (see p44), the touchstones in this respect weren't British folk-horror totems, but the thematically connected, tonally divergent likes of *Princess Mononoke* and *Ronja, the Robber's Daughter*. 'There were these mythical beings that sang through the trees at her in that book [*Ronja*],' Clark says. 'I used to find that so eerie. And when I was reading this, I was like, "Gosh, it's got that vibe of: no matter what you do, we are just little animals on this planet and it will do what it wants."'

FANTASY LIFE

Both Smith and Clark squeezed the shoot for *Starve Acre* in-between filming the first and

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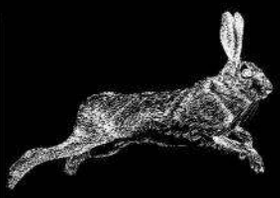
second seasons of their respective, enormo-budget fantasy shows, and the two had ample time to compare notes on set. 'Totally we did,' says Smith. 'Making *Starve Acre* or making *Saint Maud* is a different beast to making *House of the Dragon* or *Lord of the Rings*. It's a different experience, a different context, a different time. It's just different everything.'

'I did this just before *Rings of Power* [Season 1] came out,' adds Clark. 'I didn't realise how lucky I was to be working with Matt, because obviously he has done huge things, and huge press tours. He really calmed me down, and guided me, and reassured me that it would all be OK.'

For Kokotajlo, it wasn't their work in Westeros or Middle-earth that was the draw, but the more sinister likes of *Saint Maud* and, for Smith, Mary Harron's *Charlie Says*, where the actor again plays against type as cult leader Charles Manson. 'I'd seen him with that long hair in *Charlie Says*, and it was very reminiscent of the visual research I was doing on 70s archaeologists,' Kokotajlo points out. 'There was this post-hippie movement in archaeology, and there was this new wave of cool people coming in, making it about the social sciences, and about getting their hands dirty. There was this kind of wild-man quality about it. Also, the story is reminiscent of early Nigel Kneale [creator of Quatermass], which was a precursor for early *Doctor Who*. I thought that was a little connection there, using Matt.'

Despite the heightened circumstances and emotions, Clark felt connected to her character as 'someone who's waiting for it all to make sense' – a universal feeling as we all become unmoored at times in our lives. 'She's moved back to where her husband's from, and she's also doing everything she can to make her family work – but she also seems to have lost herself amongst it all,' Clark says. 'Particularly for us growing up with the [financial] crash, and then COVID, there's this feeling of, "When's it going to start?"'



'It's got that vibe of: no matter what you do, we are just little animals on this planet and it will do what it wants'

MORFYDD CLARK

Rural horror: Director Daniel Kokotajlo on location with star Matt Smith

BAD HARE DAY

Richard and Jules' unlikely salvation arrives in the shape of a hare – but this is no ordinary bunny. 'I was working on several scripts before *Starve Acre*,' Kokotajlo explains. 'All my ideas were skirting around superstition, and religion, and tradition. Then *Starve Acre* came along, which managed to really encapsulate all of those ideas in quite a simple, unique way, which was this concept around the brown hare, and how it sort of rejuvenates. But it was so linked to the drama as well, this idea that the hare symbolised the reconnecting of Richard and Juliette.'

Inspired by a formative experience with Jan Švankmajer's surreal dark fantasy *Alice*, which combines live action and stop-motion to deeply unsettling effect, Kokotajlo chose to bring the hare to the screen via intentionally uncanny puppetry, with a fully articulated animatronic constructed by Millennium FX. 'It had to have that taxidermist creepiness,' says Kokotajlo. 'I didn't want it to be a real hare. It had to be something that was off, so that you understood that the film was then moving into a different space.'

'He was so thorough, and also was quite adamant that puppetry was the way forward,' Smith confirms. 'That

The family face a breakdown of reality

Jules finds herself questioning everything after a tragedy

Morfydd Clark and Matt Smith as Jules and Richard

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puppet felt like a living, breathing animal, and sometimes was quite frightening itself,' adds Clark. 'And, working with puppeteers is fascinating because they were all there in their morph suits, making this hare come to life. The positions they have to get into to make that work is just incredible. The bathroom was particularly challenging. There was lots of bath-balancing!'

The cadaver of a deeply perverted, Benjamin Button-ing hare isn't the only thing Richard unearths under the land. After rediscovering books written by his father – or, rather, handwritten records that wouldn't look out of place on the shelf of *Se7en*'s John Doe – about a demonic spirit known as Jack Grey, Richard starts to dig. And dig. And dig. Eventually revealing the colossal, fully preserved stump of an oak tree and its tendril-like roots.

'It's one of those classic symbols of folk tales; the oak tree, and what it represents – the Celtic folklore of

Gotham's Erin Richards (left) co-stars as Jules' sister Harrie

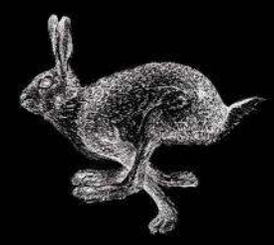
The film delves into deep and dark themes such as the parents' grief

a doorway into a spirit world,' says Kokotajlo, who expanded the mythology present in the book in order to create a 'stronger sense of this thing being in control' as Richard and Juliette seemingly fall deeper into Jack Grey's thrall. 'It was a huge prop that cost a lot of money, and it was a big job putting that into the ground, and taking care of it. I was talking about seeing the whole trunk of it at one point. But it would have been six metres in diameter. There was no way we could fit that underground. So we just had a sliver of it, so that you got a sense of how big it was. But I was very happy with it, and how it looks.'

For Smith, his character's connection to the natural (and unnatural) world meant spending significant stretches of the shoot exposed to the elements – no joke on the rugged Yorkshire moors. 'I quite like acting in rain. I don't know why. There's something about it that does a lot of the work for you, somehow,' Smith says. 'We were so lucky that, one day, we got this huge incoming of snow. Me and Daniel were like, "We've got to go outside!" It gives it a real seasonal change in the movie. It gives it a scale, in a way.'

'It wasn't that challenging for me, because I was inside all the time,' says Clark, with a satisfied chuckle. 'But every time they went to do one of Matt's digging scenes – it poured down with rain. It was like he was being cursed by nature.'

Debuting at last year's London Film Festival, *Starve Acre* has already been compared to the untouchable likes of *The Wicker Man* and *Rosemary's Baby* – parallels that both terrify and deeply flatter Kokotajlo. 'Well, it's amazing! Obviously those have influenced this film,' he says, considering his words carefully. 'But this film is on a different register, you know? There's something quieter and creepier about this. It's more akin to old British creepers and M.R. James Christmas ghost storytelling. To be next to things like *The Wicker Man* and *Rosemary's Baby* – that's high praise. And I hope it lives up to those references in people's minds.'



'[The hare] had to have that taxidermist creepiness – I didn't want it to be a real hare'

DANIEL KOKOTAJLO

STARVE ACRE OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 6 SEPTEMBER.

DISC WORLD

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DESPITE DIGITAL COMPETITION, THE NARRATIVE THAT 'PHYSICAL MEDIA IS DEAD' JUST HASN'T BEEN PROVEN CORRECT. AS DIVERSE CONSUMER HABITS HAVE DEVELOPED, 'BOUTIQUE' LABELS HAVE REDEFINED WHAT FILM OWNERSHIP CAN BE. WITH INPUT FROM WIZARDS BEHIND THE BRITISH BLU-RAY (AND NOW 4K) BOOM, *TOTAL FILM* ASSESSES THE COLLECTORS' MARKET – AND WHY DISCS ARE SO VITAL.

WORDS JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

Every so often, one extract from the show *Hot Ones* goes viral on social media. In the clip, host Sean Evans asks Matt Damon about the macro conditions behind the oft-repeated sentiment of: 'They're not making movies for me any more.'

Damon, pausing his consumption of spicy wings, answers as follows: 'The DVD was a huge part of our business, of our revenue stream, and technology has just made that obsolete. [With] the movies that we used to make, you could afford to not make all of your money when it played in the theatre because you knew you had the DVD coming behind the release and six months later, you'd get a whole [other] chunk. It would be like reopening the movie, almost. And when that went away, that changed the type of movies that we could make.'

The star's description of disc-based media as obsolete is extreme. DVDs and their high-definition successor, Blu-rays, are still produced and sold in 2024, and we now also have 4K Ultra HD discs for those with the highest-quality home-media setups. But Damon speaks accurately on the ways that the film industry can so radically change, within just a few years, when consumer habits are shifted by changing technologies, such as the rise of subscription-based streaming media.

The music industry faced similar disruption. Digital music sales in the 2000s were taking increasingly bigger shares of the market that had been dominated by CDs. Then came the rise of Spotify and similar services, where accounts grant access to seemingly the entire history of recorded music in one place. Consumers save money, but with fewer actual album sales and the reportedly abysmal royalties for streaming, very few artists can afford to pursue their craft based on releasing records alone.

One factor that has undeniably had an effect on physical media sales for film and music in the UK is the decline of the high street, linked to the rise of online shopping. Blu-rays, DVDs and CDs lose their cultural footprint when they have less of a presence in public spaces. And while independent shops are out there, a healthy retailer ecosystem needs big chains in order for mass production of discs to be justified. With the exception of some supermarkets still selling a small chart-based selection, HMV – and subsidiary Fopp in some places – is basically the last high-street retailer standing in terms of physical media that isn't second-hand.

And then there's the matter of rental chains like Blockbuster going extinct. The odd independent video shop perseveres, and you can still rent discs by post through Cinema Paradiso. But digital is now the dominant means for individual film rentals, meaning that Blu-ray has become a collector's format more than anything else. If you're getting a Blu-ray, whether it's a film you've seen before or a first-time viewing, you're most likely buying it.

Top to bottom: Ben Stoddart, BFI; Chris Holden, Second Sight; and Francesco Simeoni, Radiance

'I KNOW LOTS OF PEOPLE WHO'VE GIVEN UP ON STREAMING'

MEHELLI MODI

A disc collection means you don't lose access to a film when it disappears from streaming

COLLECT CALL

If physical media sales have dropped off considerably in recent years due to alternatives like streaming, the collectors' market has been experiencing a golden age across the past decade. And there is a growing sense that Blu-rays only stand to benefit from consumers becoming more aware of, and frustrated with, the impermanence of streaming libraries – particularly with such high-profile cases as Disney and Warner Bros. withdrawing films and shows that had been exclusive to their respective streaming services.

'Blu-ray is a bit like vinyl,' says Mehelli Modi, founder and managing director of Second Run, a UK-based distribution company for arthouse films. 'Streaming and disc can live side by side, but I know lots of people who've said they've given up on streaming because they don't have the time to watch all they thought they would, and are getting tired of things being taken off streaming without them knowing. If there's anything they really want, they will buy it.'

'I think streaming is like having a film recorded on a VHS,' says Radiance Films' managing director, Francesco Simeoni. 'I certainly remember going to a VHS and finding what was written on the side was taped over, so that impermanence is back with us in another form. The streaming landscape has grown so much with every studio having a platform, and films and TV shows being locked away, [but] very few people can subscribe to everything. And even then, the nature of the business is that these films and shows move around as they enter different deals and exclusivity periods. Regular consumers just don't want to put up with that.'

Not even counting overseas companies like Criterion bringing some of their releases over here (currently through a partnership with distributor Spirit

Sadly, there are fewer and fewer places on the high street to buy physical films

ALAMY/GETTY

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Entertainment), the UK alone has so many exciting, curated specialist labels like Second Run and Radiance, exploring all facets of contemporary and older world cinema, and setting a standard for deluxe presentations – with audio commentaries and contextualising video essays, immaculate high-definition or 4K remasters, informative booklets (or whole books with boxsets), and reprints of rare promotional materials. And as the Hollywood majors pack their own discs with far fewer bonus materials than in the DVD heyday, independent distributors have been able to license titles from even the biggest studios' catalogues. You won't get an extras-stuffed 4K UHD release of *The Wolf of Wall Street* from Universal (who first released the film in Britain), but you will from Arrow Video.

Rights holders allowing independent labels to release their films (though sometimes in limited runs with a restricted rights window) have an incentive to do so through gaining revenue from licensing fees. But as production companies or studios have shuttered over the decades, the rights situations for library titles aren't always consistent, nor are the states of the film materials required to produce a good Blu-ray release. And in the cases of conglomerates buying other conglomerates, such as Disney's acquisition of 20th Century Fox, a large selection of film history is removed from the bargaining table if the parent company's focus is elsewhere.

Boutique labels like Arrow and Eureka have released Fox titles in the past (pre-acquisition), but the catalogue now seems fully off limits. And this is to say nothing of Fox library films that had previously been released on Blu-ray going out of print with no sign of a reissue. Many of these are also unavailable on Disney+ and so go for extortionate prices on the second-hand market.

Beyond Hollywood and English-language cinema, licensing for the collectors' market can be just as tricky a process. Take Japan, for example. 'Even with the big studios, there's just a handful of people in the departments, dealing with catalogues of a hundred years of cinema,' says Adam Torel, owner of Third Window Films, a UK label that specialises in both contemporary and older Japanese cinema. 'Japan is quite like India in

'THERE'S JUST A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE DEALING WITH A HUNDRED YEARS OF CINEMA'

ADAM TOREL

Top to bottom: James White, Arrow; Kevin Lambert, Eureka; and Sam Dunn, Indicator

Specialist labels have become a treasure trove of restored classic movies

that the domestic market is 99% of the films' turnover. The international side is [rarely] a big moneymaker for them. Companies like Toho don't do any deals under certain amounts and their contracts are super thick. It's tough.'

'Everyone has their own little differences,' says Kevin Lambert, head of content at distributor Eureka Entertainment. 'Some rights holders might be easy to negotiate an actual deal with, [but] they have no interest in supplying, or investing in new 4K materials, for example. In that situation we need to look at a project and factor in the costs of restoring and making those materials ourselves, or in conjunction with an international label that may also hold the rights. Some rights holders can be sitting on beautiful new materials that they have restored with the filmmakers, but they take an awfully long time to get down to actually signing a contract. Then there are companies that believe their features are worth millions of dollars. Sadly, a lot of these films will never see the light of day.'

PICTURE PERFECT

Restoration is a crucial factor for any new release of an older title, and a subject attracting a greater deal of

Arrow Video licensed *The Wolf of Wall Street* for an extras-packed 4K release

'IT'S ALL ABOUT HONOURING THE FILM... WE WANT TO PRESENT IT AS IT WAS ORIGINALLY SEEN'

SAM DUNN

True Lies drew criticism for a restoration that 'improved' the original look of the film

scrutiny from avid collectors with 4K UHD on the market, which is likely to be the final physical media format introduced for commercial purposes. As such, concerns about the quality or accuracy of film restorations are often to do with worries that there won't be another release later that fixes any perceived issues. When done well, a 4K remaster from the original materials, especially for titles made prior to digital filmmaking taking dominance over shooting on film, can be a significant upgrade on previous Blu-ray releases, looking close to a pristine film print. 'It's all about honouring the film,' says Sam Dunn, co-director of label Indicator. 'We want to present it as it was originally seen, and not make any after-the-fact interventions or modifications.'

Second Sight Films worked on a restoration of horror staple *Dawn of the Dead*

There have been controversial restorations in recent years, including a long-awaited remaster of James Cameron's *True Lies* incorporating AI enhancement and digital noise reduction of photochemical grain that was intrinsic to how the movie looked when filmed and first released. 'Film grain is an inherent part of the whole physical filming process,' says Lambert of restoring features shot on film. 'Its removal is taking away something that was there originally.'

As head of Restoration & Technical at Arrow Video, James White oversees and produces the majority of film restorations that his label releases, working with a number of dedicated labs and facilities. 'In my opinion,' he tells *Total Film*, 'a "good" restoration is one that works to present the film in its closest approximation to how it was first presented in cinemas. I'm against the general application of new digital tools to make so-called "improvements" or "updates" to a film, which is seemingly done in some misguided attempt to make the film more appealing or relevant to modern viewers. Most filmmakers we've worked with have the utmost regard for maintaining their film's established historical presentation.'

NEW DEFINITION

The durability of Blu-ray is admirable. But it's curious that DVDs have never fully died out, like when they themselves eventually superseded the VHS format. Go to your nearest Morrisons, for example, and you'll find that the chart offerings mostly consist of DVDs for new films, with only the odd Blu-ray version. Despite virtually every new television in 2024 being HD as standard, and 18 years' worth of massively popular games consoles being able to play the discs, there's a sense that Blu-ray never really seized DVD's mantle, even though the jump in image quality on releases done right was substantial.

'The transition from VHS to DVD was smoother due to the compatibility of the player with existing

ALAMY/GETTY

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BOUTIQUE 101 Five specialist labels to get you started...

ARROW VIDEO

'We're well-regarded for the care and quality we bring to each of our releases,' says Arrow's James White. 'Arrow's primary focus has been horror, cult and genre, but we release a wide range of classic and foreign titles as well.'

KEY RELEASES

Bruce Lee at Golden Harvest 4K UHD; *RoboCop* 4K UHD; *Cinema Paradiso* 4K UHD

EUREKA ENTERTAINMENT

Eureka's collection is divided into two strands: the Masters of Cinema series showcases historically important, groundbreaking films spanning from silent cinema to contemporary works; Eureka Classics delves into cult and martial arts movies, from vintage Jackie Chan to 80s teen romance *Valley Girl*.

KEY RELEASES

Metropolis; *Mothra*; *The Police Story Trilogy* 4K UHD

INDICATOR

'We publish a diverse range of types, styles and genres of film,' says Sam Dunn of Indicator. 'From 30s Mexican horror to 70s French fantastique, by way of classic Hollywood and the history of British cinema. Our foundational philosophies are to re-platform films which have been generally overlooked or undervalued.'

KEY RELEASES

The Swimmer; *Irreversible*; John Ford at Columbia

RADIANCE FILMS

'Our mission statement is to release great but lesser-known films,' says Francesco Simeoni of Radiance. 'Despite these films being highly praised and awarded at major festivals, through the ravages of time these have fallen by the wayside. But it's our mission to bring them back, build a more complete picture of film history and perhaps even challenge the canon.'

KEY RELEASES

World Noir Vol. 1; *The Shape of Night*; *L'amour fou*

SECOND SIGHT FILMS

'More recently our output has been predominantly horror-focused,' says Chris Holden of Second Sight. 'We don't pigeon-hole ourselves, though, and we've also released titles such as *Mean Streets*, *Tangerine* and *Boiling Point*, with more non-horror releases on the way.'

KEY RELEASES

Drive 4K UHD; *Dawn of the Dead* 4K UHD; *Walkabout*

technology, unlike the shift to Blu-ray which required a new player and TV to enjoy the upgrade in picture,' Lambert tells *TF*. 'I believe that this difference in cost and timing might have contributed to a slower adoption rate for Blu-ray, rather than it being a niche interest. We're seeing the same happen now with the uptake of 4K UHD. Some people still prefer DVDs for their entertainment needs.'

'DVD arguably represented the golden age of physical media,' says Ben Stoddart, Business and Operations manager for Video Publishing at the BFI. 'The number of titles, the variety, the advent of special features, but also the bargain basement releases, all of which made it a massive success. I think Blu-ray had a slow start but then really came into its own.'

'Blu-ray has been a victim of the fact that physical sales across the board went through a decline,' adds Andrew Partridge, managing director of distributor Anime Limited. 'But as with the resurgence of vinyl, people are realising now that digital isn't forever.'

With digital being unreliable, boxsets hold considerable appeal for collectors. Curzon has achieved success with their lavish 'Curzon Collection' sets, largely focused on directors – Lars von Trier and Peter Strickland among them. 'We react to the appetite of the audience and market, or when new materials become available,' says Damian Spandley, Curzon's managing director of Programme & Sales, on the planning of boxsets. 'Or when we acquire a full, or almost full, filmography of a director. With Béla Tarr – coming soon – we acquired his full library and new materials have been created.'

Curzon's recent collections include a 4K UHD release of Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colours Trilogy*. While selling well for some distributors, that new format presents its own challenges. 'Even if a 4K master already exists so we don't have to factor in restoration costs, the authoring, encoding and replication of a UHD disc is a lot more costly than a standard Blu-ray,' says Chris Holden, founder and managing director of Second Sight, which has released *Drive*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and many more films on 4K UHD. 'We have to look at the bottom line and whether it makes sense commercially.'

Aiming at the collectors' market means a potential for feature-packed boxsets

In speaking with representatives from key British specialist labels, the broad consensus is that the market is on steady ground, even with the decreased store presence for discs. 'The market's evolving,' says Partridge. 'Physical media is changing. It's not dead and it's certainly not as niche as the majors would want you to believe. I'm not even sure majors would argue it's niche entirely, either. Looking at *Barbie*'s sales for home video, for example. Is that niche?'

Much like Margot Robbie's character in that megahit, physical media continues to adapt and endure against suggestions of obsolescence. Take that, Matt Damon. ■

The Hitcher is another recent Second Sight restoration

INTERVIEW **JORDAN FARLEY**

‘I’M STILL VERY INSPIRED – MAYBE MORE SO THAN EVER’

M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN

Following a three-decade career of zeitgeist-seizing highs and crushing lows, M. Night Shyamalan is now one of the last filmmakers standing with the clout and talent to keep original thrillers alive on the big screen. Just as he’s about to spring his latest *Trap*, *Total Film* meets the writer/director once labelled ‘the next Spielberg’ but who’s always at his best when betting on himself.

PORTRAIT **ERIC CHARBONNEAU**

WARNER BROS./ERIC CHARBONNEAU

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When *Total Film* sits down with M. Night Shyamalan in a London hotel in late May 2024, the 53-year-old writer/director is in a thoroughly reflective mood. Though he's here to talk to *TF* about *Trap*, his latest mystery-box experience about a serial killer (played by Josh Hartnett) being pursued by the authorities at a pop concert, across the corridor his middle daughter Ishana is speaking to press about her feature directorial debut The *Watched*, on which M. Night is a producer.

It's a full-circle moment for Shyamalan who, like 20-something Ishana, started directing young. He turned 29, in fact, on the same day his third feature, *The Sixth Sense*, released in American cinemas on 6 August 1999. The film's extraordinary success – second only to *The Phantom Menace* at the worldwide box office that year, and garnering multiple Oscar noms – radically altered the trajectory of Shyamalan's career from a script doctor on the likes of *She's All That*, to Hollywood's preeminent purveyor of psychological thrillers. It's a title he's retained, through serious ups and downs, for 25 years.

'It's crazy, but I don't feel that old,' Shyamalan says with a smile, relaxed in a loose-fitting linen suit and trainers. 'But when I go around and people say gracious things, I'm like, "Whoa, who are you talking about?" The good news is that that's not how I see myself.'

Like Disney, Tarantino and Hitchcock, but precious few other filmmakers, Shyamalan's name means something to even the most fair-weather film-watcher, and has become synonymous with a specific type of dark, suspenseful and, yes, often twist-based storytelling. That association was solidified by a string of early hits, including *Unbreakable*, *Signs* and *The Village* – original stories whose secrets were discussed in reverential whispers, lest eavesdroppers catch wind.

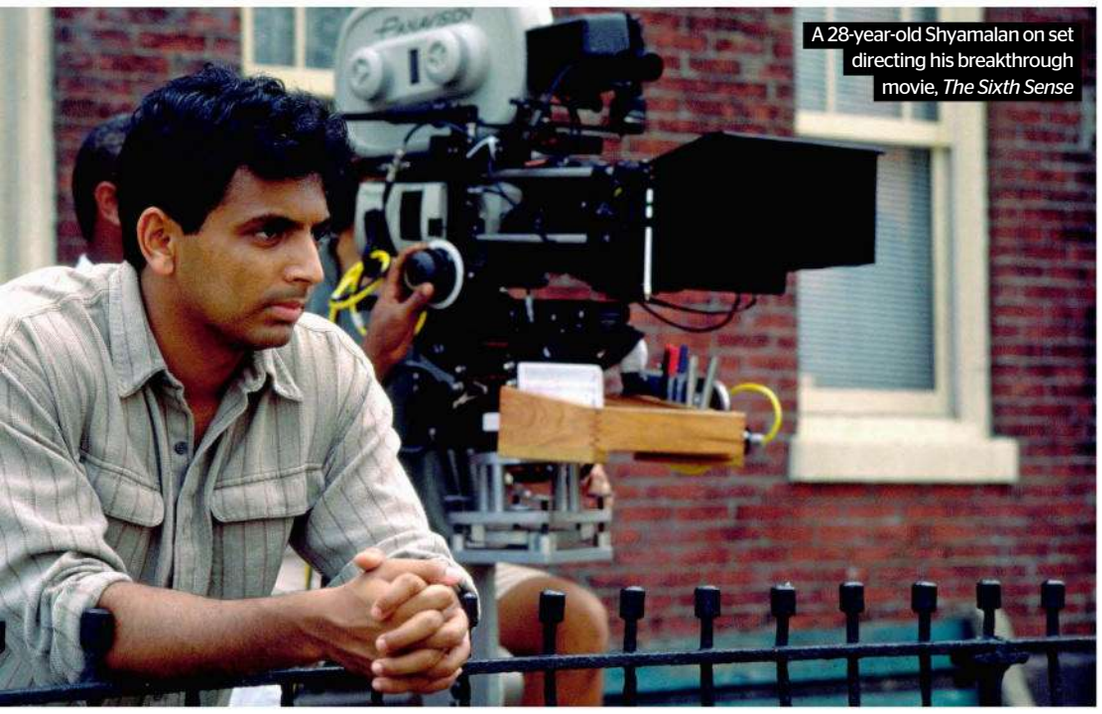
The tide drastically turned against Shyamalan following the release of *Lady in the Water*, a fairy-tale misfire and his only true box-office dud. The largely reviled films that followed – *The Happening*, *The Last Airbender*, *After Earth* – all made money against ballooning budgets, but were critically mauled, as Shyamalan tried and failed to adapt to the burgeoning era of franchise filmmaking.

Hitting reset in a major way, Shyamalan self-funded his 2015 comeback, *The Visit*, borrowing a relatively meagre $5m against his home. The found-footage comedy thriller was eventually snapped up by Blumhouse, and made its budget back 20 times over. Emboldened by the success that 'tripling down on himself' yielded, Shyamalan returned to the world of *Unbreakable* for stealth sequel *Split*, starring James McAvoy as Kevin Wendell Crumb (and his 22 other identities) – a character cut from early drafts of the 2000 film.

Trilogy-closer *Glass* brought back Bruce Willis as David Dunn – for more than 10 seconds, anyway – and Samuel L. Jackson as Elijah Price. Continuing to plough his own furrow, the film brought *Unbreakable* and *Split*'s deconstruction of superhero myths to a divisive conclusion in the same year that Marvel's Infinity Saga reached a far more rousing climax with *Avengers: Endgame.*

Since then, Shyamalan has returned to the kind of standalone, high-concept psychological thrillers that he built his name on, albeit with a slight twist – both *Old* and *Knock at the Cabin* being adaptations of existing works. *Trap*, then, marks his first wholly original thriller in years, and appropriately enough for a film featuring a father and daughter, it's another Shyamalan family affair, with the filmmaker's eldest daughter – the singer/songwriter Saleka – recording music for the film and set to appear on screen as the fictional Lady Raven. Yet another big swing in a career that's full of them.

'I'm still very inspired – maybe more so than ever – so that's a good thing,' Shyamalan says, glancing over to his film's poster. 'And I think my daughters are becoming great artists in and of themselves, and inspiring me back. It's been a regeneration.'



A 28-year-old Shyamalan on set directing his breakthrough movie, *The Sixth Sense*

WARNER BROS / ALAMY

Trap has a killer high concept – is that where you started?

It started with my daughter Saleka, who is a musician, and incorporating the life of a musician into our family. We would go on tour with her and we started to really get to know the structure of singing in these venues; what it's like to soundcheck, arrival, people fainting, and the million things that are part of a concert.

We started talking about the fact we both love the movie *Purple Rain*. They really haven't done anything like that since, where you write an album for a movie, for that narrative. It's not used as score, the characters are watching those songs being performed in the movie. There's diegetic use of the music.

I thought, 'This is the one house that can do that – make a movie and write an album for it.' So I said [to Saleka], 'Maybe that could be a really fun thing. You could write it from a fictional character's voice.'

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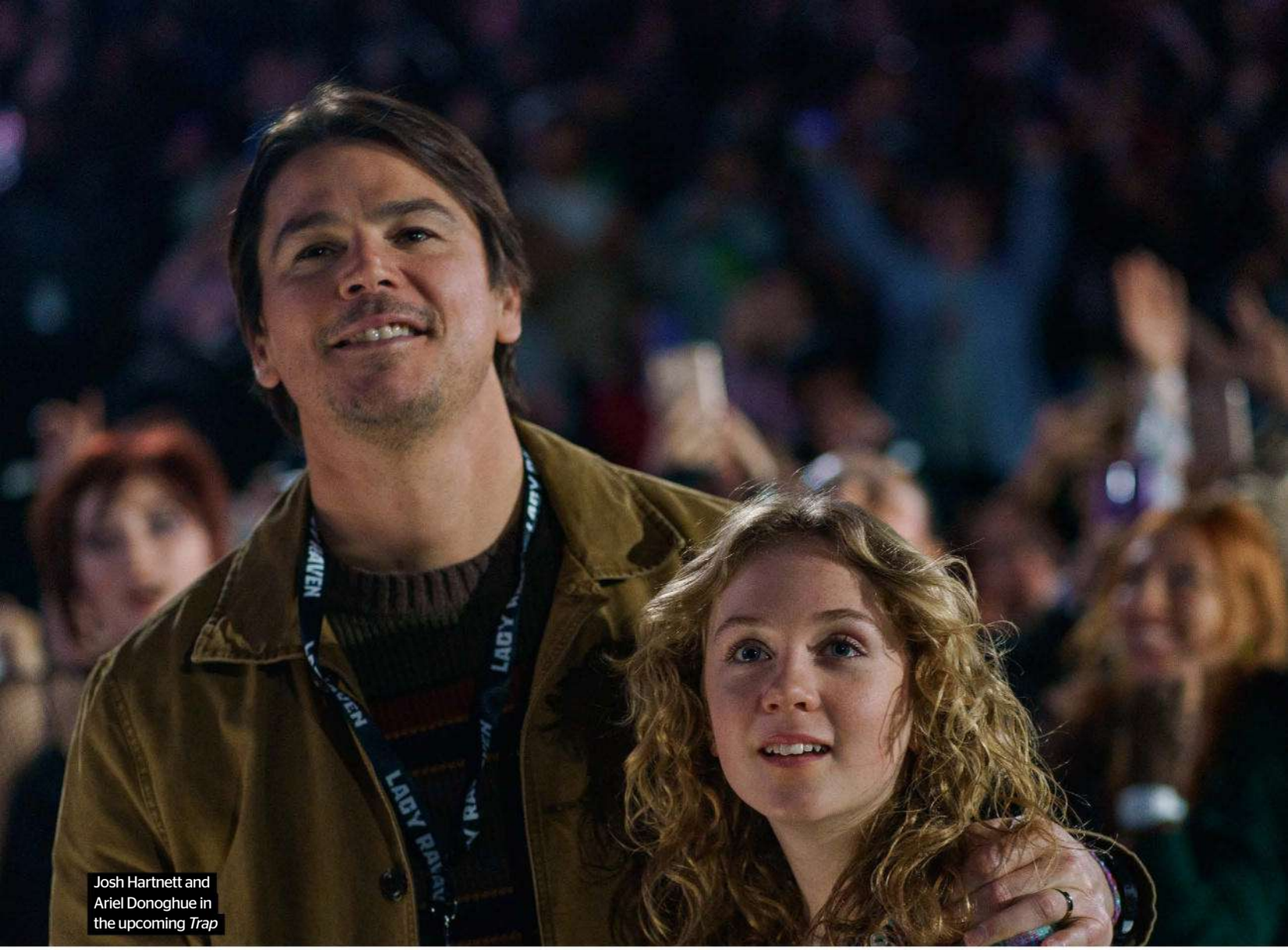

Josh Hartnett and Ariel Donoghue in the upcoming *Trap*

So that was where it started, as a conceit. And then it was, 'What could I think of at a concert?' I thought of this idea – the high-concept thing. And then I was like, 'Huh, what would be the best way to tell that story? Do you tell it from a police officer's point of view? Do you tell it from the musician's point of view?' And then I was like, 'Oh, wait a minute, I know how to tell this story…'

Is the cat-and-mouse pursuit of Josh Hartnett's Cooper by the FBI the meat of the movie?
That's a lot of the movie. There are many colours to the movie as it unfolds. But this idea of trying to get out of a concert in an arena is a beautifully Hitchcockian notion. But you have to do it without your daughter knowing. To your daughter, you're still 'Dad' at this concert. It's a fun rule.

Was there any intentionality behind the fact that this is a father-and-daughter story, made by a father and daughter?
I mean, it's so natural that that comes to me. I mimic things that are happening in my life. So the idea that it's a father-and-daughter story makes perfect sense. I can write that because I've taken my daughters to these concerts. I've been the fish out of water, like, 'Wow, look at this!'

> *'I GREW UP AT THE RIGHT TIME TO BE INSPIRED'*

You were very young when you directed your first feature. Was filmmaking written in the stars for you?
Yeah. It was going to happen somehow. I grew up at the right time to be inspired by the greatest filmmakers who made the greatest movies for kids: *Star Wars* and *E.T.* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. You're getting bombarded by the highest form of cinema, but told to you. So it was just luck. And then I was like, 'How did they do that? I want to feel that again. I want to do that.' You imitate first. And then you're a failure at that [laughs]. You keep going, 'Why did it fail? Why doesn't it look like theirs?' You keep going.

***Praying with Anger*, your first feature, is very different to anything you would go on to make…**
I just recently found and refurbished the original negative of *Praying with Anger*. I hadn't seen it in 20-something years. And my girls have never seen it. This was three weeks ago. The sound's been lost – we're trying to find the sound. And it was shocking, watching it, seeing the 21-year-old version of myself. I'm just a little bit older than my youngest daughter in the film, so they're going to see a version of me [their age]. It also was a different world back then. What you could do and say was really, really different back then. [*Praying with Anger*] is so incredibly earnest. You couldn't get anywhere near that now. It's like you're watching someone from the 18th century talking [adopts mock high-society voice]: 'I'm going to take a walk around the garden, and then I'm going to lay down.' [Laughs] I was like, 'Wow, I was so innocent.' It's super difficult to watch because it's so earnest, but it was interesting to see where I started and [where I am now] 30 years later.

Are you restoring with the intention of rereleasing it? Many likely haven't seen your first film.
No… I had to, or it will disappear forever. At some point, they wouldn't find the negative. It's already been so many years. I was like, 'I have to preserve it.' And I thought it could be a fun thing for all of us to watch, one day, as a family. Which

I'll do this summer, screen it for them. I'll be like this [puts hands over his eyes] the whole time.

You broke into Hollywood by co-writing the script for *Stuart Little* and writing/directing *Wide Awake* – a fraught process due to the experience of working with producer Harvey Weinstein. Do you have somewhat mixed feelings about that period?

That time period – everything was so alive. I feel things very intensely. Even as you say those words and the different movies, the experiences are so intense. I can remember where I was sitting, or how I was feeling, or when I got that idea, or when I heard about that. I remember when the FedEx package came with the book of *Stuart Little*. We were having a baby. I was going to write it for Saleka. She hadn't been born yet. I don't think she was even named yet.

Even the Harvey Weinstein of it all was exactly how it needed to be. You have to face the greatest challenges if you want to have an extraordinary life. You don't grow unless you have the strongest of adversaries. Without him, who knows what muscles wouldn't have been developed, or the intensity of the 'this is the way I want my life to be, not that way'?

So much of it is luck, as well, including how Miramax didn't own my writing, which was just a legal mistake on their part. Probably because they didn't think much of me as a writer! But that one little thing allowed me to get out, and do all of this stuff.

Shortly after, you experienced life-changing success with *The Sixth Sense*. As a relatively untested filmmaker at the time, how did you get Bruce Willis on side?

That is his great gift – he leaps when he believes in you. He did it for me. He did it for Quentin [Tarantino]. He did it for Luc Besson. He did it for Wes Anderson. And there's more I'm missing. If he believes in you, he's the best big brother. I've heard stories otherwise! He saw *Wide Awake*, and said he was very keen on it. I think he was moved by it.

So then he came to meet me, read the script and was like, 'Hey, I'm in.' We became very close [making *The Sixth Sense*]. I've been thinking about all that. With each movie, I feel like it's the last movie I'll ever make. So I was still writing *Unbreakable* as fast as I could [when *The Sixth Sense* came out]. I was so scared no one would let me direct again. I was like, 'Make another one as fast as humanly possible.'

WARNER BROS./ALAMY

FIVE STAR TURNS

THE SIXTH SENSE 1999
Shyamalan's wunderkind status was confirmed with this astonishing ghost story that gave us an against-type Bruce Willis, an all-timer child performance, and one of the most talked-about twists ever.

UNBREAKABLE 2000
Arguably Shyamalan's best film, *Unbreakable* is a stealth superhero movie in which Bruce Willis' injury-impervious security guard slowly realises his true calling. Ironically, Shyamalan says that at the time the studio were worried 'that no one would come to see a movie about comics'.

SIGNS 2002
Shyamalan's next hit saw Mel Gibson noticing crop circles in his cornfields ahead of a UFO invasion. 'I think my tendency to see global events from a family's perspective is an interesting one, because we kind of all experienced that [with the pandemic],' he says.

SPLIT 2016
A stealth sequel to a stealth superhero movie, *Split* showcased James McAvoy's startling range as a kidnapper with 23 personalities as a result of his dissociative identity disorder.

SERVANT (TV) 2019-2023
Among the first Apple TV+ shows, *Servant* had MNS as showrunner across four seasons. The spooky concept saw a couple hiring a nanny to look after their doll, and things got freakier from there. 'With every director that comes onto the show, I learn so much,' he said. MM

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'The Butcher' (Josh Hartnett) looks for an escape route in *Trap*

***Unbreakable* was thought to have underperformed relative to the extraordinary success of *The Sixth Sense*, but is widely considered one of your best films and ahead of its time…**

We were beginning something that was hard to understand – a guy making completely different original stories – especially because I did it with the same actor, which makes it even more confusing: 'Hey, is this like that other movie?'

It was the beginning of an era – but that era hadn't begun – of comic-book movies. I remember, everyone was so confused: 'Is it based on a comic book? What?' It was so confusing for them: 'What kind of movie is this?' They couldn't get their head around it at that moment.

But if I could talk to that 30-year-old kid I'd say, 'You were right. Don't get down. It'll eventually all work out. Just go tell the next story.'

Did you feel it was mis-sold?

I didn't have a huge amount to do with the marketing of that movie. But I found that started the future, where I say, 'Hey, just sell what I'm making. Believe in it. I'm going to keep giving you something new and there won't be a precedent for it. We're going to create it ourselves, and that's hard – creating a new market for a movie each time.'

Around the release of *Signs* you were heralded as 'The Next Spielberg' on the cover of *Newsweek*. Was that a helpful expectation at that stage in your career?

If you're an athlete at the highest level, you want to win a championship every year, and you expect that. But it's a lot of pressure for those athletes. I want to accept responsibility every single time [I make a movie]. You can see that I don't shy from risk. I'm always about 'bring it on'. I guess at that moment, when I was 31 or 32, if I'd have known that 20 years later, you and I would be sitting here talking about it, that would give me some peace: 'Hey, 16 movies.' You never know if you're going to lose your way, or you can't find inspiration any more. I didn't know there would be more movies ahead. It's hard to put it into context when you're in the middle of it.

'YOU NEVER KNOW IF YOU'RE GOING TO LOSE YOUR WAY'

By *The Village*, revelatory twists were synonymous with your name. Did you feel that you had to deliver on that expectation?

No. You can't control how they're going to talk about you, so you should just follow your inspiration each time. If I make a movie that is unexpected and has these moments, that's amazing. And if I choose to do one that's linear without that, I should do that, too. I want to make movies for audiences. But if you try to please them as your primary goal, they would hate me. It's a delicate balance. Even if that's what they want, I need to be able to say, 'This is who I am.' And by the nature of it, I traffic in mysteries and thrillers. You're always going to learn something in that surprising way.

Did you feel like the critical knives came out for you with *Lady in the Water*?

I would say I've sensed an unusual amount of headwind. But I get it. I am who I am, you know? I look the way I look. They're driving on the highway and they see my name on the poster. And that has happened for three decades. I'm in the front and I don't get to hide behind a character.

Whenever you're the first to do something, it's going to cause an, 'Oh,

M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN IN NUMBERS

22
Years old when he made debut film *Praying with Anger*, while a student at NYU

$672.8M
The worldwide box-office total of Shyamalan's highest-grossing film, *The Sixth Sense*

16
Feature directing credits to date

2
Oscar nominations for *The Sixth Sense* – Best Director and Best Original Screenplay

19
Years between *Unbreakable* and trilogy-capper *Glass*

Shyamalan with his camera operator on the set of *Trap*

yeah?' So there was an, 'Oh yeah?' How I learned to deal with that is to assume it's there. When I go on the field, it's stacked against me. I assume it, and love it, and pay no attention to it – I play the game – and do the next story. I would describe it as: 'I'm going to *Cool Hand Luke* them.' I can't do anything about the fact that you hate me, but I'm going to get up again. And, ultimately, I'm not going anywhere.

What was going through your head from 2006 to 2013, when the work wasn't connecting with audiences in the way it was previously?

All the films – with the exception of *Lady in the Water* – were financially successful. Those studio films that I made in that era made a lot of money; $250 million or $300 million, each one of them. And the budgets we had were small compared to today. So financially, there was always a validity. And I've never not been able to make a movie. So it's been this straight run for 30 years of just generating another movie.

I think what really came to me was… It was a little bit of this: 'I'm trying to please them, and do it in a system. Will this make you feel better, guys, if I did it this way?' And then I realised, 'It's never going to be that way.' So when we went from that era to the era of *The Visit* it was like, 'I'm going to give them a triple dose of me.' And it worked!

From 2015 to now that's *The Visit*, *Split*, *Glass*, *Old*, *Knock at the Cabin*, *Servant* Season 1, 2, 3 and 4, and now *The Watched* and *Trap*. What a joy it's been doing really vast and different things; and taking huge swings. A sequel – but don't promote it as a sequel. Taking huge risks with actors. Doing a movie with two gay leads. Everything that I want to do, I'm just doing. And, to their credit, both Universal and now Warner Bros., they're like, 'We believe in you. Go do your thing.' And then they're distributing at the highest level. But that wouldn't have happened without that era of, 'Let me try to do it your way, and see how that feels' as well.

'EXPERIENCING SOMETHING NEW IS STILL WHO WE ARE'

Are you surprised by the ideas that connect, and the ones that don't?

Always. What I mean by tripling down, is saying like, 'Hey, what if we made a movie with little kids and elderly people, and made them do comedy, but it's scary as well?' Or how about: 'Some guy abducts three teenage girls, and eats two of them, and there are flashbacks to her getting raped. What do you think about that? But I'm talking about the resilience of the human spirit, or what it's like to overcome trauma.' That's the energy in me. I don't want to have to explain that, you know? I'm going to do it, and show it to you – and here it is.

You fully self-financed *The Visit*, and have financed – or partly financed – every film since. What gave you the confidence to bet on yourself at that relatively low moment?

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On location in Pennsylvania filming 2002's *Signs*

It's that 'all or nothing' feeling. I'm sure a lot of entrepreneurs felt that same way, where you believe – and no one else believes – and you just have to prove it. I do make audience movies – just a different kind. It's meant for them to come in and experience this. I think that audiences have room for things besides IP. I understand why IP is a satisfying thing: 'I know what that's like.' It's much easier to sell, and get awareness in a culture where attention is the commodity.

As we have this spread-out culture, it's harder and harder to sell original movies – but I actually think they're much needed. And the audience really wants it. So hopefully others keep on going, too, and the studio system will give us enough. I'd rather it be more 50/50 than this.

Apart from *The Last Airbender*, the one time you engaged with IP filmmaking was IP of your own making, with your Unbreakable trilogy…
I tried to do it in such a way that they're unique in and of themselves. They're completely different – three different art forms, essentially. Or they're versions of related characters.

***Glass* was made at the peak of superhero cinema, but you were doing something vastly different to Marvel. Not least giving hero David Dunn a very inauspicious ending…**
For me, it's noble. The idea was almost like, the big tent-pole movie – that was going to happen over there [points in the distance], at that building. In our movie, it all ends here in the parking lot. I make smaller movies, and so it's always going to be the independent version of that.

There's two aspects. One is the sugar-content quotient, and then there's the resonance quotient. On the resonance scale, [David Dunn's death is] a really great one. It just echoes, you know? The tragedy and the irony. The bittersweetness – heroes die, and have the easiest of Achilles heels. And why is the world built like that? That someone so magnificent could be taken down by someone so small? All of that echoes. With the sugar content, on the 'day of' it tastes great, but it goes away so fast. Getting that balance right is always the joy for me.

Do you feel a responsibility to keep original suspense thrillers alive on the big screen?
I do. But they're there. A24 has built their whole brand on this, you know? People love experiencing something new, and discovering it right in front of you. Even as they're saying, 'I want this seventh version of the same thing again', because it's comforting. But being vulnerable for a moment, and experiencing something new, is still who we are. We need it.

How have you found navigating a movie industry that is almost unrecognisable compared to the one you entered?
The machinery of Hollywood was much more geared to the things that I do in the late 90s. Everyone was making high-concept original movies. They moved away from that in a way that, I think, hurt themselves. I'm praying it comes back again. The only way that happens is if, basically, movie theatres go away, and we would be in a streamer-only situation. And I've been screaming that not only is that not a good idea, it's not going to work. You can't make movies less precious and expect them to be more important [in the culture]. It's not going to happen.

Would you ever make a film for a streamer?
I would make a show for a streamer, and have, because I do believe in that every-night [experience where] you come home and connect with the same characters, and you repeat that. It's like meeting your friends. I do think that art form is deep, and can connect, and can cause cultural zeitgeist.

I don't know if you can do that with a movie on streaming, and it hasn't really happened yet in that way. *Dune*, *Oppenheimer*, *Barbie* – those are extreme examples. *Inside Out 2*, if you release that on streaming, you just don't have an impact in the same way. Other than money, what can you offer me to do that? I want impact. I want connection with the audience. Movie theatres, for me, are the highest version of the art form.

You've been remarkably prolific over the last 25 years – a new movie every one-to-three years without fail. Are you already working on something new?
It's the reverse problem for me. I have to stop it. I'm in the shower, and I'm like, "What if the next movie… *stop*. I still have four more weeks until the end of this film [*Trap*]. I have to put the sound in, I have to colour-time it." In four weeks I'm going to reach the end, and then away we go.

TRAP OPENS IN CINEMAS ON 9 AUGUST.

M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN LINE READING

'I SEE DEAD PEOPLE.'
COLE SEAR
THE SIXTH SENSE

'They called me Mr. Glass!'
ELIJAH PRICE
UNBREAKABLE

'THE BROKEN ARE THE MORE EVOLVED.'
THE BEAST
SPLIT

WARNER BROS./SABRINA LANTOS

EDITED BY
MATTHEW LEYLAND
@TOTALFILM_MATTL

★★★★★
FULLY REALISED

★★★★★
GIBBOUS MORE

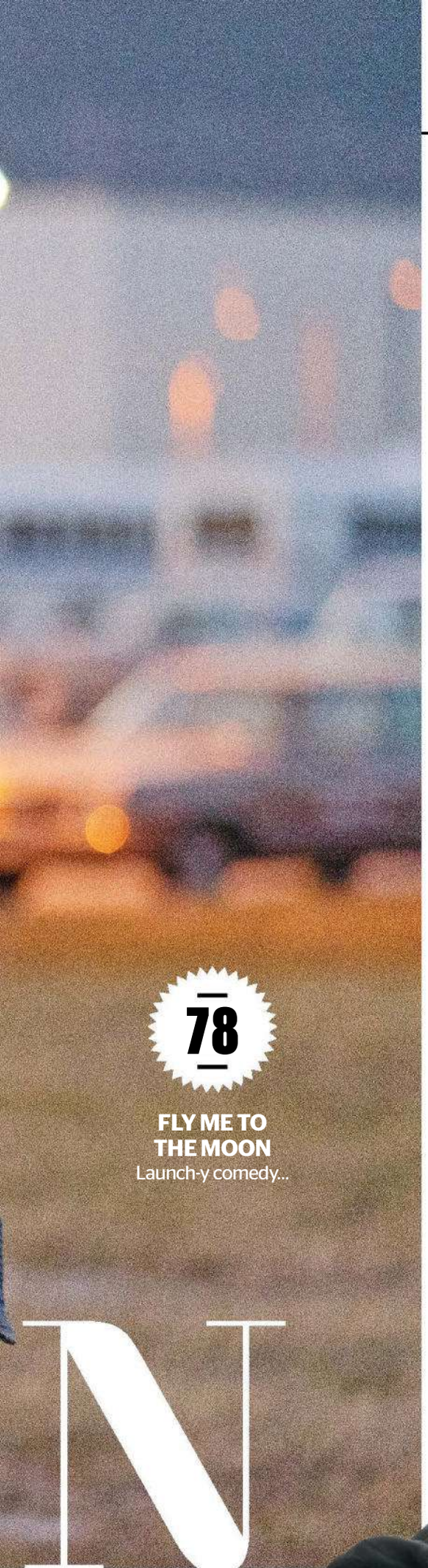
★★★★★
WAXES AND WANES

★★★★★
CLEAR AND CRESCENT DANGER

★★★★★
PURE CHEESE

SCREEN

THE WORLD'S MOST TRUSTED MOVIE



78

FLY ME TO THE MOON

Launch-y comedy...

80

82

85

87

OUT NOW

Agent of Happiness	★★★★	p83
Beverly Hills Cop: Axel F	★★★	p87
Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms	★★★	p87
Despicable Me 4	★★★	p81
Fly Me to the Moon	★★★	p78
Frank Capra: Mr America	★★★★	p81
Hundreds of Beavers	★★★★	p82
In a Violent Nature	★★★	p85
Inside Out 2	★★★★	p87
Kill	★★★	p86
The Last Breath	★★	p87
Longlegs	★★★★★	p80
MaXXXine	★★★	p83
A Quiet Place: Day One	★★★★	p81
Skywalkers: A Love Story	★★★★	p85
Sleeping Dogs	★★	p83
Younger: Looking Forward to Getting Older	★★★	p82

19 JULY

Blur: To the End	★★★★	p86
Chuck Chuck Baby	★★★	p86
Crossing	★★★★	p82
Janet Planet	★★★	p83
Shayda	★★★	p86
Thelma	★★★★	p84

25 JULY

The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare	★★	p81

26 JULY

About Dry Grasses	★★★★	p85
The Echo	★★★★	p83
I Saw the TV Glow	★★★★	p80
Mountain Queen: The Summits of Lhakpa Sherpa	★★★★	p85
Robin and the Hoods	★★	p82

2 AUGUST

Didi	★★★★	p84
Kensuke's Kingdom	★★★★	p81
Widow Clicquot	★★★★	p86

9 AUGUST

Radical	★★★	p87
Sky Peals	★★★	p82
Tuesday	★★★	p85

ALSO RELEASED

We couldn't see them in time for this issue, so head to gamesradar.com/totalfilm for reviews of the following:

TITLE	RELEASE DATE
Borderlands	9 August
Deadpool & Wolverine	25 July
Harold and the Purple Crayon	2 August
The Instigators	9 August
It Ends with Us	9 August
My Spy: The Eternal City	18 July
Twisters	Out now
Trap	9 August

For more reviews visit gamesradar.com/totalfilm

EXTRAS

Archive/Blu-ray reviews	p88-90
Extras, TV, Soundtracks, Games, Books	p91-96

REVIEWS

FLY ME TO THE MOON 12A

How to crater marketing plan...

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

SEE THIS IF YOU LIKED

CAPRICORN ONE
1978
A faked Mars mission is at the centre of Peter Hyams' pacy, chase-crammed thriller.

THE DISH
2000
A wobbly satellite dish threatens a global TV blackout during the moon landing in this charming Aussie comedy.

HIDDEN FIGURES
2016
Real-life NASA maths whizzes battle racism, sexism and gravity in Theodore Melfi's Oscar-nommed drama.

For more reviews visit gamesradar.com/totalfilm

Two of the biggest stars in cinema's firmament shoot for the moon in this jaunty if somewhat overstuffed space-race romcom. A sparky Scarlett Johansson plays rule-bending advertising maven Kelly Jones, who's hired to 'market the moon' to an uninterested America, putting her on a collision course with NASA's workaholic launch director Cole Davis (a straight-shooting Channing Tatum).

Properly paired for the first time (they didn't overlap in 2016's *Hail, Caesar!*), Johansson and Tatum's sheer star wattage gives this nostalgic high-concept comedy an Old Hollywood feel, a throwback to the days when trailers yelled, 'Together at last!' Set in the feverish run-up to the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing (and released just before that event's 55th anniversary this summer), it's a bold, retro-styled original story, one that stands out in a sea of safe summer sequels.

A pleasingly big picture, both in its expansive visuals and its story scope, *Fly Me to the Moon* takes off rapidly once Woody Harrelson's cheerfully devious White House fixer Moe Berkus has booted Kelly off Madison Avenue and into Cape Canaveral's vast rocket hangers, where Cole wrestles with NASA's underfunded, breakage-plagued moonshot programme.

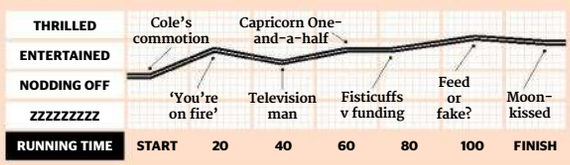
Rose Gilroy's confident script isn't afraid of a classic awkward meet-cute (Cole sweetly saves Kelly from a diner-table candle disaster). But director Greg Berlanti (best known as the TV powerhouse co-creator of *You*, *Titans* and *Arrow*) is eager to milk laughs from the friction between Cole's exasperated high ideals and Kelly's worldly smarts. One of her savviest moves is making astronauts Aldrin, Armstrong and Collins 'bigger than the Beatles' through relentless TV exposure, until all the licensing (Omega watches, Rice Krispies) rains money into the moonshot programme. Kelly's got the kind of smiley ruthlessness that will swap Cole for an actor doppelganger in news footage if he refuses to play ball.

Like 2022's *The Lost City*, it's a romcom where Tatum jostles for screen space with a spirited female lead, but this time Johansson (who also produced the movie) has the lion's share of the fun stuff. Tatum, whose physical prowess lights up his best roles, is unhelpfully confined to pacing crossly through offices or delivering control-room pep talks, while Johansson floors a convertible or bowls a bin through a shop window. Die-hard Chan fans (aka 'Tatum-tots') may also rue the slow-burn love story's old-school lack of smooching. The only thing here getting its top torn off when things get fiery is the Apollo 11 space capsule.

As a female striver in the 60s, Johansson keeps Kelly unashamedly flirty at work and play, teaching the reluctant Cole how to manipulate arrogant senators into voting for vital NASA funding. Her disruptor energy and perky period frocks add a shot of *Mad Men* raciness to the film's tone, punched up by seamless use of TV news footage, moon-themed 60s soundtrack hits, and Harrelson's God-given ability

DIRECTOR Greg Berlanti **STARRING** Scarlett Johansson, Channing Tatum, Jim Rash, Anna Garcia, Woody Harrelson **SCREENPLAY** Rose Gilroy **DISTRIBUTOR** Sony **RUNNING TIME** 132 mins

FILM PREDICTED INTEREST CURVE™



SONY

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If only the film had better-looking lead actors, eh?

to steal every scene he enters with his 'The President wants this' swagger and shit-eating grin.

All this playfulness runs nicely around the outsize glamour of the Kennedy Space Center's giant launch pads and rockets, whose world-changing mission the film pays (mostly) careful respect to. Using the 60s space race for backroom dramas isn't a new idea – *The Dish* (2000) and *Hidden Figures* (2017) forged feel-good tales from its IRL events. But *Fly Me to the Moon* boldly goes where no similar film has gone before, by inserting a cheeky (and definitely fictional) conspiracy plot into the mix. When Berkus orders Kelly to stage a secret fake moon landing – ready for broadcast to a watching world as a backup – both Kelly's integrity and her relationship are suddenly placed in jeopardy.

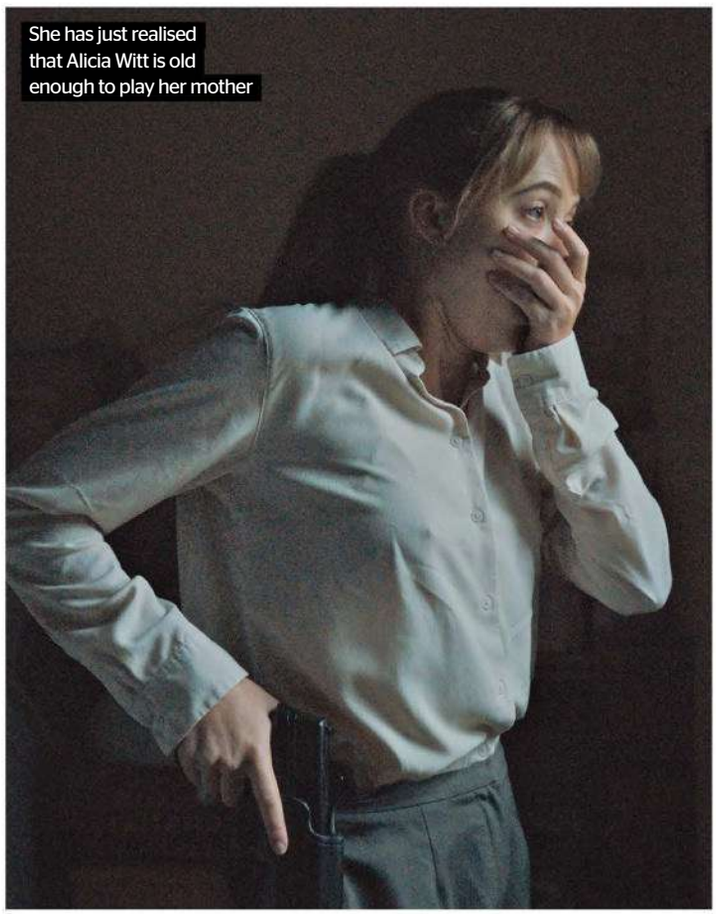
Winking at the famous conspiracy theory that Stanley Kubrick shot the 'moon landing' (as outlined in 2002 mockumentary *Dark Side of the Moon*), the film plays the sham lunar rehearsals for laughs, pivoting to a chaotic farce spoofing movie-set tensions. (Jim Rash's diva director curses the fact that, 'My Armstrong is a whiny little bitch.')

'Set in the feverish run-up to the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing, it's a bold, retro-styled original story, one that stands out in a sea of safe sequels'

Berlanti works hard to blend a range of moods into the film, its lively LOLs tempered with some melancholy secrets that both Cole and Kelly are keeping. But his knack for combining an intimate story nimbly with an historic event doesn't quite last the course. *Fly Me* starts to drag a bit late on, from the sheer weight of winding real history, confected conspiracy and a fictional love affair together, and trying to keep it all airborne.

The aspect that needs more plot propellant is the surprisingly low-key romance. Johansson is at her sultry, husky-voiced best, but she and Tatum don't have rocket-fuel-strength chemistry (the role was originally planned for Chris Evans, to ignite that spark their Marvel encounters showed off). They wind up creating a sweet and gentle simmer, rather than the explosive Hepburn/Tracy-style screwball energy needed to get this ambitious movie into high orbit. **KATE STABLES**

THE VERDICT Despite leaving its love affair on the launch pad, this sassy NASA romcom fulfils its mission to entertain.



She has just realised that Alicia Witt is old enough to play her mother

LONGLEGS 15

Dark Cage...

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

A little Nicolas Cage goes a terrifyingly long way in Osgood Perkins' movie, a serial-killer-procedural-slash-occult-delving creepfest that confidently echoes *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Zodiac* before spinning off wildly on its own diabolical axis.

Maika Monroe assumes the Jodie Foster role as Lee Harker, an introverted FBI newbie whose near-psychic intuition could be the key to ending a barbaric string of whole-family slaughters in 90s Oregon. Cage, meanwhile, is the film's titular Lecter: an unctuous predator with a frizzy mop, sing-song cadence and prosthetics that make him weirdly resemble Celia Weston in Shyamalan's *The Village*.

Kicking off in the same rounded-square ratio used in David Lowery's *A Ghost Story*, *Longlegs* unnerves from the get-go by having a little girl face a wintry encounter with a wheedling, half-viewed Cage. It takes a while for Perkins to double back to this blood-curdling preamble, by which time we have become fully invested in Maika's Lee, her genial boss (Blair Underwood) and her vexed relationship with her anxious mother (Alicia Witt).

The horrors, like Cage himself, are largely kept off-screen for much of the movie's duration. Yet with its sinister soundscape and sepulchral visuals, *Longlegs* succeeds as a deeply disconcerting experience, one that burrows into the brain as insidiously as the innocuous means its villain employs to disseminate his evil. **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT An authentically scary dance with the devil places Perkins among modern horror's classiest practitioners.

I SAW THE TV GLOW 15

Screen captured...

★★★★½ **OUT 26 JULY** CINEMAS

Evading easy categorisation, Jane Schoenbrun's vivid follow-up to *We're All Going to the World's Fair* can be read as a transgender allegory, one that compellingly explores the idea of being born into one existence, feeling you should be living a different one, but not knowing how to cross over to this other life where it seems you would be happier.

In 1996, sheltered teen Owen (Ian Foreman) is intrigued by commercials for *The Pink Opaque*, a young-adult fantasy show that's on too late for him to watch. But with the help of the older Maddy (Brigette Lundy-Paine), Owen gets a taste of the show, which then becomes an obsession. Two years later, Owen (now Justice Smith) and Maddy have continued to bond over the series, but find themselves questioning their own reality and identities. As time goes by, fantasy seems to bleed into Owen's suburban life.

The Pink Opaque nods to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, though in its look and curious atmosphere it also plays like a pastiche of the weirder side of 90s Nickelodeon, evoking the likes of *The Adventures of Pete & Pete* and *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* As Owen's memories of both the show and real life mutate, Schoenbrun proves a dab hand at conjuring uncanny images; even Fred Durst (as Owen's father) simply sitting in stone-faced silence becomes nightmare fuel.

JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS

THE VERDICT An eerie and empathetic allegorical horror whose reality-bending conceits both unnerve and mesmerise.

Always ensure your jumper matches the hot-air balloon you're playing inside

BLACK BEAR, MODERN FILMS, PARAMOUNT, PARK CIRCUS/PINK OPAQUE LLC, PRIME VIDEO, SONY, UNIVERSAL

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DESPICABLE ME 4 U

★★★☆☆ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

The sixth entry in the Despicable/Minions franchise pits Gru (Steve Carell) against newly un-incarcerated old rival Maxime Le Mal (Will Ferrell), whose desire for revenge forces the ex-supervillain and family into witness protection. The hasty move to suburbia yields some funny, if predictable, character clashes, particularly between Gru and country-club-loving neighbour Perry (Stephen Colbert). There are some lively misadventures with five mega-Minions, while the addition of the cunning Gru Jr. (cue father/son bonding/tormenting scenes) helps ease the stick-to-the-formula vibes. **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

FRANK CAPRA: MR AMERICA 12

★★★★☆ **OUT NOW** DIGITAL

Matthew Wells' doc explores the life, work and legacy of the titular director. Tracing Capra's arc from his arrival in the US as a six-year-old Sicilian immigrant, it sees biographers, archivists and Alexander Payne unpack Capra's complex relationship with his adopted country. We gain a strong sense of the continuing relevance of his films; there's also insight into the contradictions of an artist who forged a brand of 'common-man' Americana yet had blind spots regarding diversity. Genuinely fascinating, it suffers only from being a little brisk at 92 minutes. **JANE CROWTHER**

KENSUKE'S KINGDOM PG

★★★★☆ **OUT 2 AUGUST** CINEMAS

This animated take on Michael Morpurgo's kids' novel sees shipwrecked 11-year-old Michael (Aaron MacGregor) awake on a remote island, where he discovers fellow inhabitant Kensuke (Ken Watanabe) and his wondrous hideaway. Merging 2D images with mixed-media backgrounds to lovingly limpid effect, Neil Boyle and Kirk Hendry's eco-fable thrives where different cultures and elements meet. A scavenger attack adds teeth to a story that might otherwise seem too simple, but it's the heartfelt revelations about Kensuke's losses that truly elevate the tale. **KEVIN HARLEY**

A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE 15

★★★★☆ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

Michael Sarnoski's (*Pig*) prequel centres on a tremendous performance from Lupita Nyong'o as Sam, a terminally ill poet who takes a trip to New York on the day that blind, noise-attracted aliens violently invade Earth. Sam forms a connection with law student Eric (Joseph Quinn), the pair exchanging whispered and signed details of their lives. While it shares plenty of DNA with the previous Quiet Places, *Day One* has its own distinct character. It's a gripping, moving watch – and Sam's pet Frodo is one of the great felines of modern cinema. **ANNA SMITH**

Superman decides to give up and become a pirate

THE MINISTRY OF UNGENTLEMANLY WARFARE TBC

Lost in the Postmaster...

★★☆☆☆ **OUT 25 JULY** PRIME VIDEO

After the sober-ish combat story of *The Covenant*, Guy Ritchie reassumes caper positions for this WW2 thriller. Far from playing to his strengths, the result is a blasé relapse for a director prone to glib stylings and posh-bloke mannerisms when on familiar turf. Lacking the irreverence that lifted his early work, *Ministry* isn't even throwaway fun: it's slickly diverting at best, DOA at worst.

Loosely grounded in 'Operation Postmaster' reality, the story involves a ragtag gaggle of well-spoken renegades doing off-book missions for the Brits. Tasked to prevent supplies from reaching enemy U-boats, Henry Cavill's Gus March-Phillipps gathers his gang to biff the Germans; meanwhile, Eiza González's Marjorie keeps creepy Nazis distracted.

Channelling *Kingsman* vibes via *Inglourious Basterds*, *Ministry* offers flashes of style but precious little substance or tangible stakes. And any potential for wit in cameos from Rory Kinnear (Churchill) and Freddie Fox (Ian Fleming) is squandered by a script too flat for satire.

All of which would matter less if the action were fun, rather than thuddingly under-powered. González doesn't even get to raise a fist, reduced instead to trading inane riddles with leering Nazi Heinrich (Til Schweiger). Can you blame her for looking so bored? **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE VERDICT Sturdy casting can't salvage this lukewarm wartime lark, a lacklustre affair from a disengaged director.

'Come here often?"

HUNDREDS OF BEAVERS 12A

Fur crazy...

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

Buster Keaton, Tex Avery, *Caddyshack*, *Evil Dead II*, George Miller, arcade games, crazed TikTok videos with animal filters… blend all of those influences together and you *might* begin to explain the inspired absurdity of *Hundreds of Beavers*, a DIY, black-and-white slapstick comedy that outstrips *Sasquatch Sunset* to claim the title of 2024's most WTF movie.

Presented as a silent-era photoplay, but utilising animation techniques and more than 1,500 effects shots, Mike Cheslik's relentlessly funny lo-fi offering tracks 19th-century applejack salesman Jean (Ryland Brickson Cole Tews, who co-wrote with Cheslik) as he battles the titular critters (humans in mascot costumes) and attempts to woo the daughter (Olivia Graves) of a protective, gun-toting furrier (Doug Mancheski).

With the action taking place in wintry snowscapes, the non-stop gags range from such basic buffoonery as falling into snowholes and icy stalactites landing on our hero's (gloriously rubbery) face to ambitiously scaled, virtuoso chase sequences that mash all manner of techniques, from miniatures and puppets to post-production FX.

If it's sometimes repetitive it's deliberately so, building on gags and compounding Jean's loopy cycle of flailing and failing. And while the 108-minute run time is too much, it's not because the jokes run dry but because this much inventive idiocy is exhausting. But to paraphrase Frank Drebin, nice beavers. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT Still bummed that Warners shelved *Coyote vs. Acme*? Here's the fix. Absolute Looney-cy.

ROBIN AND THE HOODS PG

★★☆☆☆ **OUT 26 JULY**

SKY CINEMA, NOW

Another Sky Cinema production that looks like 80s telly. Shame, because there's imagination on show: a band of kids, led by 11-year-old Robin (Darcey Ewart), regard the scrubland at the end of their cul-de-sac as a magical kingdom, and the hippy lady (Gwendoline Christie) who lives there as a witch. Then an evil property developer-slash-sorcerer (Naomie Harris) pitches up with concrete plans… The effects are naff and the supporting kids lack presence – *Goonies* this ain't – but the real issue is that cheap-looking lensing. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

CROSSING 15

★★★★★ **OUT 19 JULY** CINEMAS

Living on the Black Sea coast in Georgia, stoical retired schoolteacher Lia (an impressive Mzia Arabuli) is a woman on a mission: she has promised her late sister that she will find the latter's trans daughter Tekla, who is rumoured to be living somewhere in Istanbul. Riffing on road-movie conventions and deftly capturing the Turkish city's teeming diversity, writer/director Levan Akin (*And Then We Danced*) fashions an unhurried, plaintively scored and compassionate drama, in which unexpected emotional connections are forged between individuals from different generations. **TOM DAWSON**

YOUNGER: LOOKING FORWARD TO GETTING OLDER PG

★★★☆☆ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

Danielle Sellwood and Alex Rotas' documentary follows four older women as they find a new lease of life competing in athletics competitions. If age is just a number, it's still one to be celebrated – as the women age out of one bracket, they ascend to the next, becoming the 'youngest' in their group. What unites all is an infectious sense of joy in the communities they have found. Gentle yet vibrant, and a middle finger to the negative stereotypes around ageing. Released with *Older*, Sellwood's docu-short on activist/photographer Rotas. **JOEL HARLEY**

SKY PEALS TBC

★★★☆☆ **OUT 9 AUGUST** CINEMAS

There's more than a hint of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* to this gloomy but intriguing drama, as alienated British-Asian burger-flipper Adam becomes unsettlingly obsessed by his estranged father's sudden death at the Sky Peals motorway service station. First-time writer/director Moin Hussain spins an atmospheric, strip-lit food-court tale which tucks its multiracial metaphors neatly into a mounting pile of cryptic, sci-fi visions. *Screw*'s Faraz Ayub gives Adam a touching vulnerability, but can't compensate for the film's doleful tone and shuffling pace. **KATE STABLES**

LIGHTBULB, SKY, MUBI, TULL STORIES, BFI, DOGWOOF, NEW WAVE, A24, PRIME VIDEO, UNIVERSAL

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AGENT OF HAPPINESS

TBC

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

For the country of Bhutan, happiness is a matter of state policy, with the government having created its Gross National Happiness index in the 1990s to quantify the population's sense of satisfaction. Since then, 'happiness agents' like Amber Kumar Gurung have taken to the road to chart how people are feeling. Thoughtful, revealing and – yes – rather cheery, this doc from Arun Bhattarai and Dorottya Zurbó attempts to make sense of Amber and his country's pursuit of happiness – objectively measured in cows and tractors, but far more complex than that. **JOEL HARLEY**

THE ECHO TBC

★★★★★ **OUT 26 JULY** CINEMAS

After making her narrative feature debut with 2021's haunting *Prayers for the Stolen*, Mexican-Salvadoran director Tatiana Huezo returns here to documentary filmmaking. *The Echo* tracks life in the remote village of El Eco, where kids inherit their parents' hardscrabble lives of caring for elderly relatives and tending to sheep and crops. But one girl, Montse, dreams of Mexico City… Eschewing interviews and voiceover, Huezo's film could be mistaken for a scripted drama. It's measured and mesmerising, with a real feel for the land, climate and people. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

JANET PLANET TBC

★★★★★ **OUT 19 JULY** CINEMAS

Pulitzer-winning playwright Annie Baker (*The Flick*) makes her feature directorial debut with this gentle, low-key mother-daughter dramedy. Set in 1991, it stars Julianne Nicholson as Janet, an acupuncturist living in a cabin in rural Massachusetts. Her clingy 11-year-old, Lacy (Zoe Ziegler, excellent), isn't too keen on mum's boyfriend Wayne (Will Patton) nor, for that matter, the other folk that drift in and out of the story, all of them vying for Janet's attention. While proceedings do meander, Baker's touching script offers a nuanced, tender look at the parent-child dynamic. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

SLEEPING DOGS 18

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** PRIME VIDEO

Retired cop Roy Freeman (Russell Crowe) re-investigates an old murder case. The twist? Roy now has Alzheimer's, meaning every stale clue is fresh again, and he's learning not just about the victim, Dr. Joseph Wieder (Marton Csokas), and the Death Row inmate pinned for the killing (Pacharo Mzembe), but also about himself. From this decent premise co-writer/director Adam Cooper spins a turgid thriller full of cliches and unwieldy flashbacks. Karen Gillan, playing the professor's assistant, is hamstrung by the material, and Crowe is fast approaching the point where he requires a comeback. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

She knew wearing that mask while sunbathing had been a bad idea

MAXXXINE 18

Hollywood ending...

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

The past ain't finished with you, Maxine,' yells Kevin Bacon's odious private dick in writer/director Ti West's trilogy-closing slasher tale. Following prequel *Pearl*, this sees Mia Goth reprising her wannabe porn-star character from franchise starter *X*. Now a success in adult entertainment circa 1985, Maxine is chasing a legit LA acting career.

West's fictional story rubs shoulders with 80s history: real-life serial killer Richard Ramirez, aka the Night Stalker, is on the loose. Sex workers that Maxine knows become victims; detectives Williams (Michelle Monaghan) and Torres (Bobby Cannavale) aim to take down the killer. Things take a twist when Bacon's sleazy PI tracks her down for his wealthy client, who has an unusual interest in Maxine. Who is he? Well, that's one of the questions hanging over the film (though the answer isn't as interesting as you'd hope). What works better is the mid-80s atmos conjured by West: nods to *St. Elmo's Fire*; a soundtrack including ZZ Top and Frankie Goes to Hollywood.

All of this is enjoyable, if slightly blatant in its nostalgia baiting. It's a shame, meanwhile, that one seemingly key subplot is a red herring. Still, Bacon and Elizabeth Debicki (as a no-nonsense movie director) relish their roles, while Goth has roaringly good fun as the title character. And if you've come for the carnage – faces are branded, eyes slashed, bodies crushed – then *MaXXXine* should satisfy your bloodlust. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

THE VERDICT The final act loses its way, but in the main West wraps his slasher trilogy in satisfying style.

Adolescent angst – in the early days of digital

DIDI 15

He was a skater boy...

★★★★★ **OUT 2 AUGUST** CINEMAS

When incorporating social media in their stories, modern teen flicks tend to focus on the gossipy, going-viral aspects of influencer culture. But for lots of young people, some online spaces can be appealing meeting grounds for expressing your personality in theoretically low-stakes situations (which can still feel huge to introverts).

These elements of the digital age were particularly well-rendered in Bo Burnham's *Eighth Grade* (2018). Writer/director Sean Wang's similarly tender and charged debut feature works as a period-piece companion to that film, albeit with a few key differences in milieu.

Set in 2008, this semi-autobiographical comedy drama tracks a Taiwanese-American's awkward coming-of-age in Fremont, California, at a time when digital media is holding increasing sway over kids.

Navigating cultural shame, eroding friendships and online chats with crushes, 14-year-old Chris (Izaac Wang) is more interested in amateur-skating videography than fulfilling the hopes and expectations of his immigrant mum (a superb Joan Chen). Millennials of a certain age will find the recreation of the period's web and youth cultures scarily accurate. Elsewhere, Wang warmly and insightfully probes Chris' insecurities as he tries to find his place in an overwhelming world – one in which peers constantly highlight his ethnicity as a principal part of his still-developing identity. **JOSH SLATER-WILLIAMS**

THE VERDICT A sweet, scrappy and funny coming-of-age tale that movingly explores the messiness of teenhood.

THELMA 12A

She was a scooter girl...

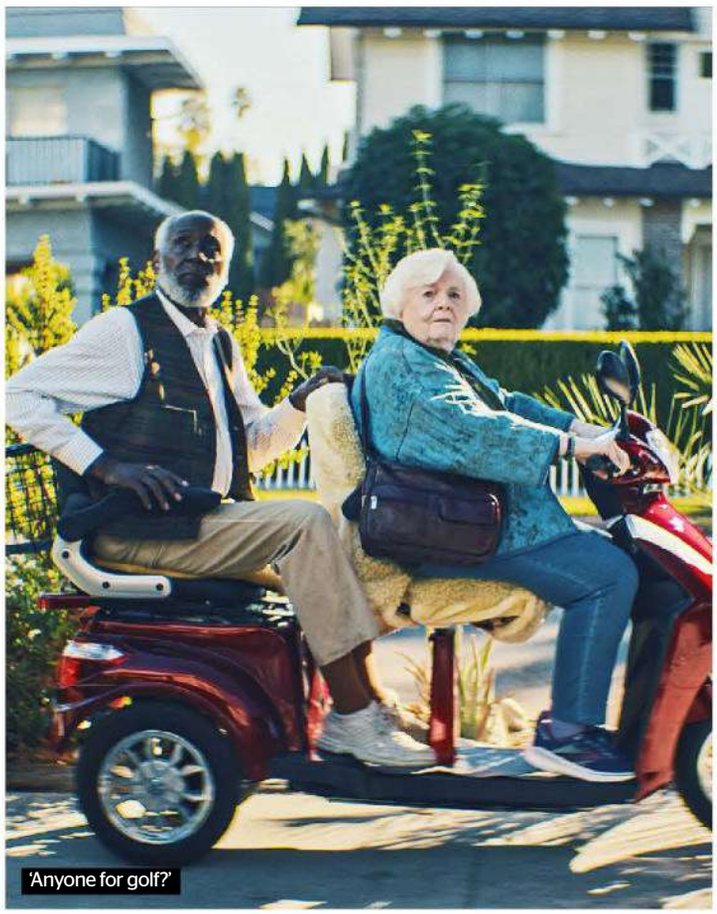
★★★★★ **OUT 19 JULY** CINEMAS

A pistol-packing first-time leading lady in her 90s, June Squibb (*Nebraska*, *Inside Out 2*) is the motor driving this wildly charming revenge-com. Her Thelma is a sweet but stubborn LA oldster scammed out of $10,000 by a fake caller requesting bail for her grandson Danny. Suddenly, she's on a runaway vengeance spree, with pensioner pal Ben (a deadpan Richard Roundtree in a worthy last role) reluctantly riding shotgun when she hijacks his two-seater disability scooter.

First-time writer/director Josh Margolin sharpens the film into a smart senior thriller, giving us tense geriatric POVs of the challenges that ensue. Thus, a careering care-home scooter chase, a nail-biting furniture climb to swipe a weapon, and a thudding face-plant fall all have the feel of high-stakes Mission: Impossible action sequences (aided by Nick Chuba's sly, Lalo Schifrin-alike score).

There's a warm *Little Miss Sunshine* feel about the bond between Thelma and Danny (*The White Lotus*' Fred Hechinger) as he hares after her. But Margolin doesn't swerve the old-age pain of losing spouses and freedom, as Ben and Thelma bond and bicker their way toward a senior showdown. Squibb's just-right combo of cosiness and crafty determination keeps sentimentality at bay, letting the film show the everyday heroism of ageing (she did her own stunts, too, à la Cruise). So go call your granny; better still, take her to see this. **KATE STABLES**

THE VERDICT June Squibb's warm but wily gran-with-a-plan turns this elder-scam revenge spree into a winning comedy.


'Anyone for golf?'

ALTITUDE, KEVIN BAKER/A24, NETFLIX, NURI BILGE CEYLAN, PICTUREHOUSE, UNIVERSAL

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ABOUT DRY GRASSES 15

★★★★★ **OUT 26 JULY** CINEMAS

Writer/director Nuri Bilge Ceylan's (*Winter Sleep*, *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*) absorbing character study centres on Samet (Deniz Celiloglu), an art teacher coming to the end of a four-year placement in a remote, snowy village in Anatolia. Desperate to be transferred to Istanbul, he finds himself accused of inappropriate behaviour towards his pupils. Despite the odd mystifying stylistic flourish, this is a compelling, superbly shot portrait of a misanthropic antihero. There's also an exceptional turn from Merve Dizdar as a disabled female activist who challenges Samet's selfishness and cynicism. **TOM DAWSON**

TUESDAY TBC

★★★★★ **OUT 9 AUGUST** CINEMAS

Who needs a chess-playing bloke in a shroud when you can have Death embodied by a giant talking parrot? That's the intriguing proposition at the heart of Daina Oniunas-Pusic's debut feature, in which a resolute mother (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) fights to prevent this avian Grim Reaper fluttering away with her terminally ailing teen (Lola Petticrew). It's a bold move for the former *Seinfeld* regular, who gamely embraces her Croatian writer/director's fantastical Carrollian flourishes. Would that all its FX were as polished as its CG macaw (voiced by Arinzé Kene). **NEIL SMITH**

MOUNTAIN QUEEN: THE SUMMITS OF LHAKPA SHERPA 12A/12

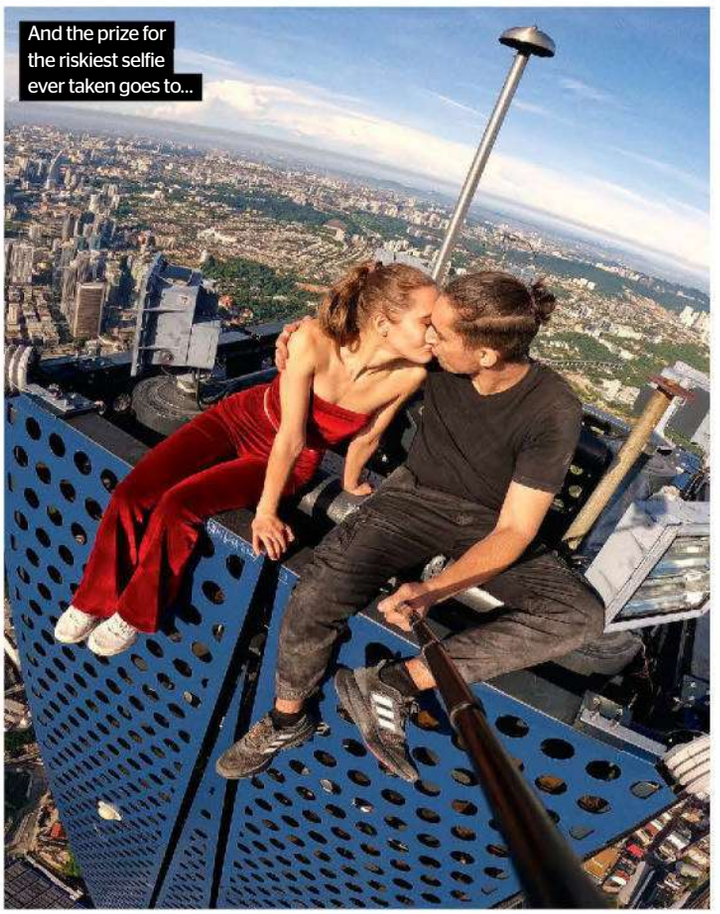
★★★★★ **OUT 26 JULY** CINEMAS
31 JULY NETFLIX

Mountain guide Lhakpa Sherpa made history by becoming the first Nepali woman to summit and descend Mount Everest. But did things peak for her there? We follow Lhakpa – now a single parent working as a dishwasher – as she returns to Everest, attempting to build a better life for her daughters and reckon with past trauma. This account of hardships endured is harrowing, yet Lucy Walker's documentary brims with all the wit and tenacity of its subject. A humbling portrait of an extraordinary woman. **JOEL HARLEY**

IN A VIOLENT NATURE 18

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

A newly freed demonic presence stalks the young holidaymakers who've nicked his locket in debut writer/director Chris Nash's unsettling take on the slasher flick. The USP here is that the vengeful Johnny (Ry Barrett) is mostly shown only from behind; when we do get a frontal view, he's wearing an old diving helmet – but what's underneath the mask, and our antihero's backstory, prove less interesting than Nash's innovative use of oblique viewpoints and low-budget practical effects. Sluggish pace aside, this is a cunning blend of arthouse and grindhouse. **JAMES MOTTRAM**



And the prize for the riskiest selfie ever taken goes to...

SKYWALKERS: A LOVE STORY 18

Tall tale...

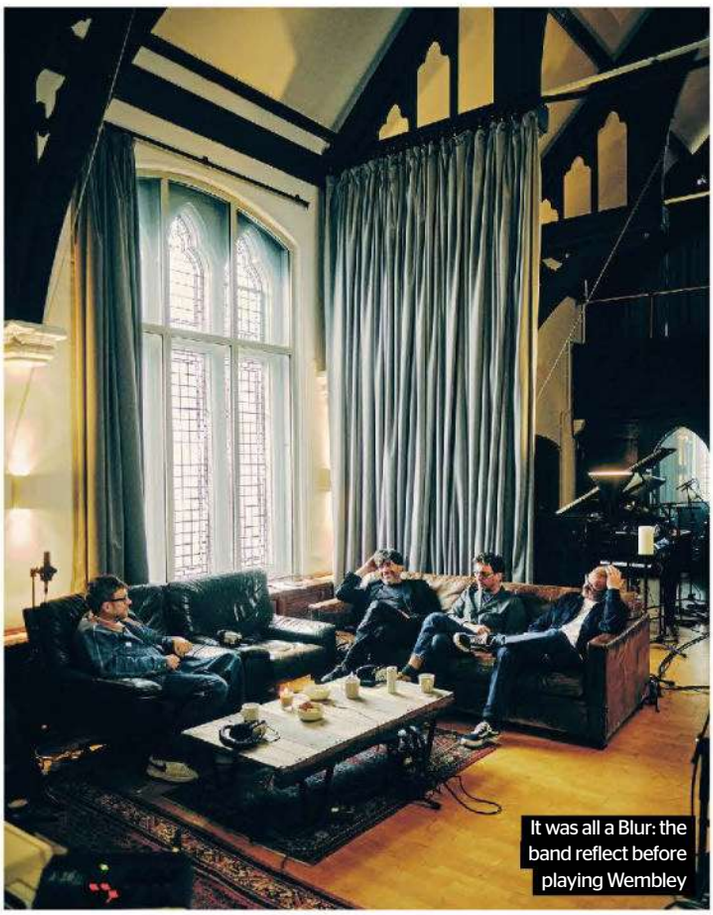
★★★★★ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS **19 JULY** NETFLIX

Ahead for heights is a strict requirement for this pulse-pounding documentary, in which two Moscovian daredevils set out to scale the world's second-tallest skyscraper without ending up in handcuffs or falling to their deaths.

'We are not vandals,' insists Angela Nikolau, a circus performer's daughter whose sky-high acrobatics lend a gymnastic grace to the illegal pastime of rooftopping. 'But we are technically criminals,' admits her partner Ivan Beerkus. The latter's plan to mount Kuala Lumpur's Merdeka 118 edifice and perform a *Dirty Dancing*-like lift on its cloud-grazing spire propels this giddily captivating nerve-shredder. It's a mission that proves as gripping as Philippe Petit's quest to tightrope-walk between the Twin Towers in the stylistically analogous *Man on Wire* (2008).

Culled from over 200 hours of material, shot in six countries across seven years, Jeff Zimbalist and Maria Bukhonina's film is as much a triumph of assembly as it is a testament to pluck. Whether it succeeds as a love story, though, is open to debate. There's no doubt Beerkus fell for Nikolau hard when she entered his aggressively male-dominated orbit. Yet by the time the Merdeka hoves into view their bond has started to resemble a fractious union of convenience – one that somewhat undermines the filmmakers' persistent attempts to elevate it into a star-crossed romance for the ages. **NEIL SMITH**

THE VERDICT Caveats aside, truly vertiginous thrills await those who brave this celebration of high-stakes risk-taking.



It was all a Blur: the band reflect before playing Wembley

BLUR: TO THE END 15

The story of some charming men...

★★★★★ **OUT 19 JULY** CINEMAS

A year on from their triumphant shows at Wembley Stadium comes *Blur: To the End*, a documentary capturing the band's 2023 reunion. Once it was all about Britpop, *Parklife* and the Oasis rivalry; now there's middle age and dodgy knees to contend with. And, as lead singer Damon Albarn puts it, the very real fear they are a band 'trying to relive their past'.

Toby L.'s fly-on-the-wall documentary takes us from the recording of the band's mournful recent album *The Ballad of Darren* to a series of warm-up gigs (including a homecoming at Colchester Arts Centre) and then those two nights at Wembley, the biggest venue the band has ever played.

Albarn, together with guitarist Graham Coxon, bassist Alex James and drummer Dave Rowntree, are genial subjects. They're frequently very funny: at one point Albarn tells the headmaster of his old school that the vibe of the music room would be improved with a 'bowl of weed'. Elsewhere, Coxon recounts how he nervously urinated in a roadie's Diet Coke can before the first Wembley gig.

For a while, the film holds back on the songs, which may have the uninitiated wondering what all the fuss is about. But the concert finale, playing in 'London's living room' as Rowntree puts it, is a perfect crescendo, showing just why this four-piece is as resonant and relevant as it's ever been. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

THE VERDICT Hugely entertaining. Blur fans will have a ball with this harmonious blend of nostalgia and novelty.

SHAYDA 15

★★★★★ **OUT 19 JULY** CINEMAS

Inspired by the director's own real-life experiences, Noora Niasari's film is an arresting look at both Iranian culture and domestic violence. Zar Amir Ebrahimi delivers a nuanced turn as mother-of-one Shayda who, after leaving abusive husband Hossein (Osamah Sami), finds refuge in a shelter for women in the Australian suburbs. Tension mounts when Hossein reappears, although the drama fizzles out somewhat in the final third. This perceptive film does still hit a nerve, however, while Ebrahimi and newcomer Selina Zahednia convey a credible mother/daughter bond. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

WIDOW CLICQUOT TBC

★★★★★ **OUT 2 AUGUST** CINEMAS

This lavish biopic celebrates 18th-century winemaker Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin Clicquot, founder of the champagne brand that bears her name. Producer/star Haley Bennett ferments a potent brand of melancholy in the title role, mourning the loss of husband François (Tom Sturridge) while crafting batches of bubbly. Helmer Thomas Napper (*Jawbone*) worked on Joe Wright's *Atonement* and *Pride & Prejudice*, and this is of similar vintage – part period bodice-ripper, part tragic romance. Non-linear storytelling prevents the tale from losing its fizz as it shifts between notes of joy and sorrow. **JOEL HARLEY**

CHUCK CHUCK BABY 15

★★★★★ **OUT 19 JULY** CINEMAS

Love, songs and magic mushrooms offer release from workaday struggles in director Janis Pugh's big-hearted quasi-musical. Louise Brealey plays Helen, a chicken-factory worker in Wales who lives with her gruesome ex and cares for his dying mum. When old crush Joanne (Annabel Scholey) returns to town, might Helen's lust for life bloom? Stronger on details than story, Pugh teases flashes of bawdy wit and warmth from portraits of female camaraderie, aided by sturdy casting: amid the broader crowd-pleasing swings, Brealey plucks out subtle notes of conviction. **KEVIN HARLEY**

KILL 18

★★★★★ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

Hyped as the most violent film India has ever produced, director/co-writer Nikhil Nagesh Bhat's frenzied martial-arts thriller is simply relentless. Boarding a New Delhi train, off-duty commandos Amrit (Lakshya) and Viresh (Abhishek Chauhan) take on a gang of knife-wielding bandits. Amrit, meanwhile, is also out to stall the arranged marriage imposed on true love Tulika (Tanya Maniktala). Bhat serves up a succession of skilfully staged fight scenes, in which combatants endure and inflict extreme levels of savagery. Alas, the visceral effect gradually dulls as repetition sets in. **TOM DAWSON**

ALTITUDE, DISNEY, VERTIGO, STUDIO SOHO, KALEIDOSCOPE, NETFLIX, TRINITY CINEASIA, SIGNATURE, REUBEN BASTIENNE

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RADICAL TBC

★★★☆☆ **OUT 9 AUGUST** CINEMAS

Based on a 2013 *Wired* magazine article by Joshua Davis, *Radical* sits squarely in the tradition of inspirational-teacher films. Set in 2011 in the violence-plagued Mexican border town of Matamoros, it stars Eugenio Derbez (*CODA*) as Sergio Juarez, an idealistic educator who's determined to unlock the potential of his 12-year-old pupils at a poorly resourced elementary school. Writer/director Christopher Zalla (2007's *Padre Nuestro*) follows a conventional dramatic path, but conveys a vivid sense of place and elicits engaging performances from his ensemble cast. **TOM DAWSON**

INSIDE OUT 2 U

★★★★☆ **OUT NOW** CINEMAS

Pixar's big-hearted sequel sees Joy (Amy Poehler) and the gang making way for new emotions (principally Maya Hawke's delightfully rattling Anxiety) within puberty-rocked Riley (Kensington Tallman). If lighter on emotional heft than its 2015 predecessor, Kelsey Mann's film is still a genuinely compassionate comedy, full of cringingly funny teen trials. And alongside *Turning Red* and *Orion and the Dark*, *IO2* offers a timely reflection of the anxiety epidemic among kids. Warm, engaging and gorgeously rendered, it's keen to show us how complex and gloriously messy teens can be. **KATE STABLES**

CREATION OF THE GODS I: KINGDOM OF STORMS 15

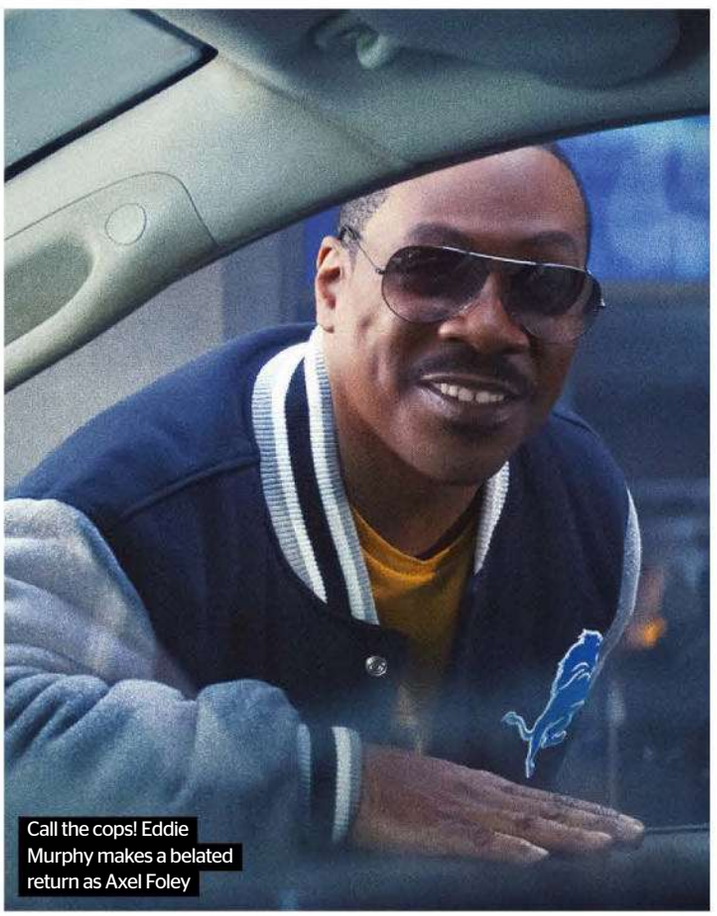
★★★☆☆ **OUT NOW** DVD, BD
22 JULY DIGITAL

The first in a planned trilogy, this epic fantasy blends Chinese mythology with bombastic action on an immense scale. Loosely adapting a 16th-century novel, it centres on an ancient struggle between humanity and the gods, battling it out over an all-powerful scroll. The stuff with the humans (including Yu Shi and Chen Muchi) is harder to care about, but director Wuershan puts his colourful cast of gods and immortals to good use. Occasionally clunky green screen aside, the cinematography is truly awe-inspiring. **JOEL HARLEY**

THE LAST BREATH 15

★★☆☆☆ **OUT NOW** DVD, BD, DIGITAL

Five treasure-hunting friends exploring the labyrinthine wreckage of a World War Two battleship find themselves up against diminishing oxygen levels and increasing numbers of hungry sharks in this middling humans-vs-nature flick. Lacking both the breathless ingenuity of *The Shallows* and the goofy thrills of Netflix hit *Under Paris*, Joachim Hedén's thriller must instead fall back on its characters to keep viewers engaged: a problem when they're so broadly defined and thinly written. As such, the biggest point of interest is the appearance of the late Julian Sands in his final film role. **ANTON VAN BEEK**



Call the cops! Eddie Murphy makes a belated return as Axel Foley

BEVERLY HILLS COP: AXEL F 15

Foley artistry...

★★★☆☆ **OUT NOW** NETFLIX

It's been 30 years since we last saw Eddie Murphy's motormouthed Detroit cop Axel Foley tearing up LA in *Beverly Hills Cop III*. But now he's back, still silver of tongue as he brashly disobeys orders, but also following Mav's lead in *Top Gun: Maverick* by being a little less cocky, a little more wise.

'They love me in Beverly Hills,' grins Foley, this time drawn to the city to protect his estranged lawyer daughter, Jane (Taylour Paige), whose life is threatened when she defends a young man framed for murder. The real culprits, she believes, are LA cops operating under the jurisdiction of the Rolex-wearing Captain Grant (Kevin Bacon).

Mark Malloy's feature debut is a pleasing return to the action thrillers of the 80s, favouring a run-and-gun investigation that serves up police corruption, drug cartels and crunchy, in-camera vehicular mayhem. Old pals Taggart (John Ashton) and Rosewood (Judge Reinhold) return, and variations on Harold Faltermeyer's iconic score get plenty of mileage.

Is it as zesty as Martin Brest's 1984 original? Of course not. But the father-daughter dynamic works well and the era shift means our fish-out-of-water hero now has to battle against being washed up. ('They don't want swashbucklers out there any more; they want social workers.') You might not be giving it the full Axel-like 'heh-heh-heh', but you'll be smiling and chuckling throughout. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT Definitely more fun than *Coming 2 America*. Don't be surprised to see a fifth film greenlit.

Denzel Washington's towering performance as Malcolm X

MALCOLM X 15

Changing man...

1992 ★★★★★ **OUT 29 JULY** BD, 4K UHD, DIGITAL
EXTRAS ★★★★★ Poster/Art cards (4K only), Deleted scenes

Often faint-praised as his most 'conventional' film, Spike Lee's Malcolm X biopic is bolder – and more contentious – than its rep suggests. From initial conception, the much-debated script took 25 years to reach screens. When Lee became director, he tussled with the studio to craft an epic and intimately detailed portrait of a conflicted leader, galvanised by a dynamic lead.

With Denzel Washington upfront, Lee anatomises Malcolm's growth across four miniseries-friendly periods. We meet him as a petty thief and hustler, then a prisoner converted to the Nation of Islam. Malcolm's time as an orator follows, before a break from the NoI leads to tragedy.

Lee and DoP Ernest Dickerson used David Lean's grandiose classics as reference points, and it shows in their focused ambition. Even if Lee had been more experimental elsewhere, his restraint suggests a filmmaker finessing his force. Referencing Rodney King, the opening bristles with anger; the hospital march is a mighty show of directorial power; and the Sam Cooke-accompanied drive to the Audubon Ballroom moves deeply.

Problems include Lee's self-casting, though supports Al Freeman Jr. and an affecting Angela Bassett command attention. Best of all, Washington's show of quiet passion and purpose is what biopics are made for. Faint praise be damned: he was robbed on Oscar night.

KEVIN HARLEY

THE VERDICT With controlled elan and a dazzling Washington, Lee's old-school biopic remains a rich, resonating labour of love.

CHARIOTS OF FIRE PG

1981 ★★★★★ **OUT 26 JULY** CINEMAS

The story of real-life undergraduate sprinters Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson) and Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross) chasing glory at the 1924 Olympics in Paris, the late Hugh Hudson's multi-Oscar-winning drama was one of the defining Brit-flicks of the early 80s. Viewed four decades on, it's easy to mock its slow-mo images of clean-cut young men in pristine white kit running to Vangelis' iconic score. Yet alongside the film's patriotic triumphalism, there's a critique of Establishment prejudices, while the 'outsider' protagonists show an intriguing ambivalence towards their own athletic dreams. **TOM DAWSON**

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS 15

1992 ★★★★★ **OUT 29 JULY** BD
EXTRAS ★★★★★
Commentaries, Featurettes, Booklet

Adapted by David Mamet from his Pulitzer Prize-winning play, this 'small' but perfectly formed drama features one of the most impressive casts in modern American cinema. Al Pacino, Jack Lemmon, Alan Arkin and Ed Harris play Chicago real-estate salesmen forced to compete for their jobs by a demonic Alec Baldwin. As they eviscerate each other – and the American dream – the results are electric. This limited-edition Blu-ray includes an archival Lemmon chat-track and new essays. **MATT GLASBY**

FLOATING CLOUDS 12

1955 ★★★★★ **OUT NOW** BD
EXTRAS ★★★★★
Commentary, Featurettes, Booklet

An overdue Blu debut for one of Japanese auteur Mikio Naruse's (*When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*) most feted films. Largely set in post-war Tokyo, it charts the on-off, passionate yet agonised affair between office worker Yukiko (Hideko Takamine) and womaniser Tomioka (Masayuki Mori). There are flickers of levity (involving a con-man guru), but the prevailing mood is one of elegantly rendered hopelessness. As extras acknowledge, the plot meanders – albeit en route to a devastating destination. **MATTHEW LEYLAND**

A DRY WHITE SEASON 15

1989 ★★★★★ **OUT NOW** BD
EXTRAS ★★★★★
Intro/Q&A, Featurette, Short films, Booklet

Adapted from André Brink's 1979 novel, Martiniquan filmmaker Euzhan Palcy's brutal drama – the first major Hollywood movie directed by a Black woman – stars Donald Sutherland as a South African teacher whose eyes are finally opened to the horrors of apartheid. Something of a call to arms for Western audiences in 1989, today the film can be accused of fitting into the pattern of white-saviour narratives. But the foregrounding of Black South African actors throughout imbues it with authenticity. **ANTON VAN BEEK**

101 FILMS, ARROW, BFI, ENIGMA PRODUCTIONS, ICON

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POINT BREAK 15

It's 100% pure adrenaline...

1991 ★★★★★ **OUT 5 AUGUST** DVD, BD, 4K UHD, DIGITAL
EXTRAS ★★☆☆☆ Featurettes, Additional scenes, Stills gallery (4K/BD only)

It just jumps off the screen. I live for that,' beams Patrick Swayze in *Make or Break*, a featurette that accounts for half of the 45 minutes' worth of bonus material that was filmed in 2006 and has been now ported onto this new UHD and Blu-ray release.

Well, Patrick, we live for it, too – which makes it worthwhile seeing *Point Break* in 4K, even if the support package is so much flotsam and jetsam. Originally, Ridley Scott was set to direct, with Charlie Sheen readying his wetsuit to play greenhorn FBI agent Johnny Utah, who infiltrates a gang of Californian surf dudes knocking off banks. Today, it's impossible to imagine anyone other than Keanu Reeves partnering with Gary Busey (as fellow agent Pappas) to take down Swayze's soulful surfer Bodhi. And who else but Kathryn Bigelow could have simultaneously celebrated and subverted all the machismo on show while marshalling such scintillating action?

One of the most fun, thrilling movies of its era, *Point Break* invented new technology and experimented with filming techniques to deliver the ultimate ride. But CGI, crucially, doesn't get a look in (Bigelow's then-partner, James Cameron, released the game-changing *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* the same year). Those are flesh-and-blood surfers on actual towering waves, and Swayze got the jump on Tom Cruise by doing the skydiving scene for real. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

THE VERDICT Don't be a dead soul inching along the freeways in a metal coffin; watch this action classic instead.

'Ever fired your gun in the air and yelled, "Aaaaaaah"?'

'The graphics are much better than down the arcade...'

THE LAST STARFIGHTER 12

Playing with laser fire...

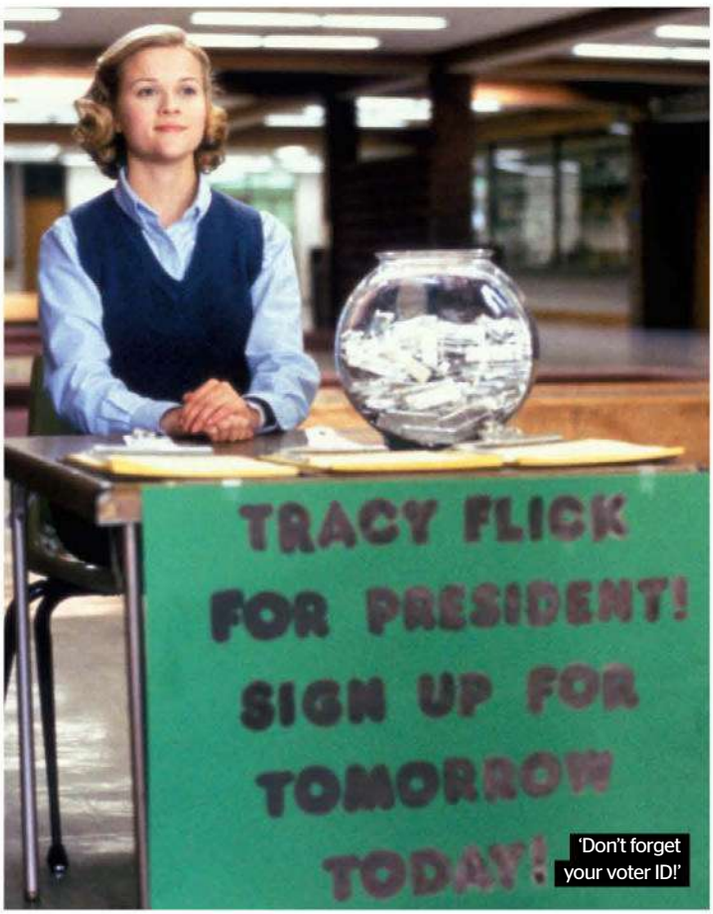
1984 ★★★★☆ **OUT NOW** 4K UHD, BD
EXTRAS ★★★☆☆ Commentaries, Featurettes, Booklet

Inspired as much by T.H. White's Arthurian saga *The Once and Future King* as *Star Wars*, this sci-fi adventure centres on Alex Rogan (Lance Guest), a teenager whose sole escape from his workaday trailer-park life is trying to nab the high score on the Starfighter arcade machine. After doing just that, Alex is approached by the cabinet's creator, Centauri (Robert Preston), who reveals the game was designed to find pilots for a real-life interstellar conflict...

One of the mini-boom of movies that saw Hollywood trying to cash in on the early days of the video-game craze, *The Last Starfighter* has somehow not felt the love of 80s nostalgists as much as the likes of *Tron* (1982) or *WarGames* (1983). Rather curious, that: not only does the film – directed by original Michael Myers actor Nick Castle – remain more enjoyable than many of its contemporaries, it also broke new ground with the CGI effects employed in its space-combat sequences.

Admittedly, the passage of four decades has taken some of the shine off those digital flourishes (this stunningly clear 4K restoration does them no favours). But much like the plot's lack of originality, it's an issue that's easy to overlook, thanks to the film's winning cast (including Dan O'Herlihy and Catherine Mary Stewart) and whimsical geek-chic sincerity. Extras include a Guest-and-son commentary.
ANTON VAN BEEK

THE VERDICT Greetings, Starfighter! A welcome blast from the past steeped in Atari-age charm.



'Don't forget your voter ID!'

ELECTION 15

Reese initiative...

1999 ★★★★★ **OUT 29 JULY** 4K UHD
EXTRAS ★★★☆☆ Commentary, Featurettes

A history teacher on the ropes, a divisive student, an eyeball problem, a lie, a resignation… On the surface, Alexander Payne's second feature pre-empts his recent *The Holdovers*. But you'd need to add vats of acid to properly characterise *Election*, a film whose brittle satire of high-school politics and flawed masculinity still stings, 25 years on.

In pitch-perfect casting, Reese Witherspoon plays laser-targeted school-presidential hopeful Tracy Flick opposite Matthew Broderick as flagging teacher Mr. McAllister. While he preaches (then forgets…) history's morals, she sets her claim on the future. But will McAllister's misogyny, marital infidelity and electoral tampering prove his undoing?

Bolstered by on-point support from Chris Klein and Jessica Campbell as competing candidates, *Election* is often seen as a 90s-centric political allegory. For Flick, read Hillary Clinton. But Payne's multi-perspective adaptation of Tom Perrotta's novel has as much to say about attitudes towards ambitious women, entitlement and abused male power.

From Witherspoon's strutting urgency to Broderick's peak-form Ferris-gone-wrong, *Election* embodies these themes with meticulous complexity. Flick projects superiority but is also sympathetic; McAllister's high-minded front only masks his self-serving malfeasance for so long. Pin-sharp indie filmmaking that still merits your vote. **KEVIN HARLEY**

THE VERDICT A caustic comedy of curdled ethics, *Election* remains a strong candidate on the best-of-1999 ballot paper.

RISKY BUSINESS 15

1983 ★★★★☆ **OUT 29 JULY** 4K UHD
EXTRAS ★★★★☆ Director's cut, Commentary, Featurettes, Screen tests, Essay

Between Tom Cruise dancing in his undies and a plot about a horny teenager's wild escapades with an enterprising sex worker (Rebecca De Mornay), you'd be forgiven for thinking writer/director Paul Brickman's film was just another raunchy 1980s teen comedy. But beneath the slick surface lurks a smart, subversive critique of Reagan-era capitalism. Its atypically dark heart is made all the more apparent by a downbeat original ending, finally presented here as part of the movie (in its director's cut). **ANTON VAN BEEK**

CALIGULA: THE ULTIMATE CUT TBC

1979/2023 ★★★★☆
OUT 9 AUGUST CINEMAS

More than 40 years after its first release, Tinto Brass' notorious Roman epic gets a shot at legitimacy, thanks to tireless work from producer Thomas Negovan and others, who've integrated previously lost footage to create something more akin to the original vision. Malcolm McDowell shines as the titular sex-crazed emperor, while Helen Mirren's previously truncated performance – as courtesan Caesonia – is largely restored. At nearly three hours it's still unwieldy, but this study of power and privilege has real purpose. **JAMES MOTTRAM**

WERCKMEISTER HARMONIES 12A

2000 ★★★★☆
OUT 2 AUGUST CINEMAS

In our politically precarious times, slow-cinema seer Béla Tarr's mesmerising fable unfolds like an augur of brewing fascism. In a Hungarian town, the public await the arrival of a circus and an unseen 'Prince', only for riots and military clampdowns to ensue. But what's with the dead whale on show? Spurning narrative, Tarr emphasises metaphysics and mystery to elliptical but haunting effect. Shot in mournful long takes, his hallucinatory images and depictions of erupting violence emerge as stark omens of doomy unease. **KEVIN HARLEY**

PLANET OF THE VAMPIRES 15

1965 ★★★★☆ **OUT NOW** BD
EXTRAS ★★★★★
Italian cut, Super 8 cut, Commentary, Documentary, Featurettes, Gallery, Booklet, Postcards

If this tale of spacefarers investigating a distress signal isn't quite up there with director Mario Bava's best, it's surely his most influential, looming large over *Alien*, *Pitch Black* and several more. And besides, as Joe Dante says here, 'like most Bava movies, it's not about story, it's about style'. In that regard, this hybrid of pulp sci-fi and Gothic horror is as good as anything he did, its lurid flair made even more striking by this sumptuous Blu-ray. **ANTON VAN BEEK**

CURZON, PARAMOUNT, PENTHOUSE FILMS INTERNATIONAL, RADIANCE, SPIRIT ENTERTAINMENT

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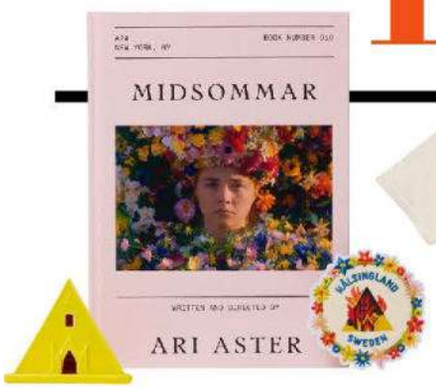
EXTRAS



VARIOUS

MIDSOMMAR COLLECTION

OUT NOW

July 2024 marks five years since the release of Ari Aster's cult-in-every-sense horror; celebrate not with an ill-advised rural getaway but by checking out A24's varied collection, which includes T-shirts, patches, an incense holder based on the film's Hårga temple and a 'Flo scream' pin. There's even a cute kids' tee (a thankfully more innocuous spin on *Midsommar*'s own bear 'outfit'). Take paws at shop.a24films.com.

COLLECTIBLE

JOHN WICK TUBBZ

OUT NOW

People keep asking if he's quack… But now yeah, we're thinking he's quack. Yep, it's bloodbath time with this cosplaying duck based on Keanu Reeves' un-retired hitman. Standing roughly 9cm tall when outside of his tub display stand (black, of course), Baba Ducka is splattered with detail: pistol, wedding ring, silk tie. Frankly, he's as mallard as they come. Shoot off to tubbz.com.

COLLECTIBLE

LEGO BRICKHEADZ LEGOLAS & GIMLI

OUT NOW

Following such pairings as Frodo/Gollum and Aragorn/Arwen, the fellowship of the brick expands with this set featuring two of the bestest buds in all of Middle-earth. The bromantic duo are stacked with both decorative elements (Legolas' torso, Gimli's helmet) and orc-mashing weaponry (bow and arrow, axe). Each BrickHead has its own baseplate for stationary display (well, they've done enough epic trekking). Toss your dosh at lego.com.

COLLECTIBLES

FUNKO POP! INSIDE OUT 2

OUT NOW

Owning complex emotions can sometimes be difficult; less so when they're personified vinyl figurines. Fresh from Pixar's barnstorming sequel we have Anxiety (be sure to choose her the safest spot on the mantelpiece), Envy (why can't we have a shiny memory orb to sit on, too?), Embarrassment (don't stare so much!)… and ugh, do we really have to do the whole 'describing' thing for Ennui? You do it. Live the life of Riley at funkoeurope.com.

MATTHEW LEYLAND

A24, FUNKO, LEGO, NUMSKULL

They lived long and prospered – and continue to do so today

A VERY SPECIAL EPISODE

THE MEASURE OF A MAN S2, 1989
The show's watershed moment involves a heady test of the main characters' mettle. Deeming android Data to be Starfleet property, Picard's bosses decide they need to take the tin man apart to see what makes him tick. And so *The Next Generation* becomes a courtroom drama, with Picard arguing for Data's autonomy, while a reluctant Riker is forced to speak against his friend's sentience. The ethically complex story, submitted on spec by Melinda M. Snodgrass at the encouragement of pal George R.R Martin, is peak *Trek*.

CLASSIC TV
STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION
Picard reset...

1987-1994 AVAILABLE ON DVD, BD, DIGITAL, NETFLIX, PARAMOUNT+

Star Trek was dead, Jim. Cancelled in 1969 after three seasons due to declining viewing figures, the sci-fi series was boldly going nowhere. However, buoyed by *Star Wars* mania and a boom in television syndication, resurrection was inevitable. By 1986, the original crew of the Enterprise were on their fourth big-screen outing, and executives were clamouring for more.

Series mastermind Gene Roddenberry and Paramount executive Rick Berman rebuilt tomorrow's Enterprise bigger and better – and now with a detachable saucer. Patrick Stewart was cast as Captain Jean-Luc Picard, despite reservations ('[Stewart] just didn't match [Roddenberry's] idea of what a captain should be,' Berman later recalled). Nonetheless, the English thesp was tasked with leading *Trek*'s next generation. But first, bosses instructed, lose the wig.

Picard's crew was bolstered by suave number one William Riker (Jonathan Frakes), while android Data (Brent Spiner) followed Spock as the resident non-human on the bridge, as did later addition Worf (Michael Dorn), a Klingon who took on a more prominent role as the series progressed. Blind engineer Geordi (LeVar Burton), counsellor Troi (Marina Sirtis) and Dr. Crusher (Gates McFadden) rounded out a diverse and colourful crew.

Even with its stellar cast, *The Next Generation* didn't take off at warp speed. The characters struggled to find their footing, hampered by Roddenberry's ruling that there should be no conflicts between the crew. However, when it returned for a second series, *TNG* did so with renewed fortitude – one can track the shift in quality to the arrival of Frakes' beard and the introduction of major antagonists the Borg. By S3, the show had come into its own, culminating with Picard's assimilation into the Borg collective and the groundbreaking cliffhanger that followed.

A willingness to explore more mature themes led to some of the franchise's best episodes (see boxout, left, for a prime example). The show brought fresh dimension to species like the Klingons and Romulans, while introducing enduring characters of its own such as the sinister Cardassians and Picard's series-long foil, the impish Q (John de Lancie).

Returning for four movies and a small-screen Picard spin-off, the crew of the Enterprise D proved to have as much longevity as their predecessors. The success of *TNG* inspired the politically charged *Deep Space Nine* as well as the more playful *Voyager* and *Lower Decks*. *Star Trek* lives (long) and prospers today still – and it took the groundbreaking work of *The Next Generation* to make it so. **JOEL HARLEY**

PARAMOUNT, CBS

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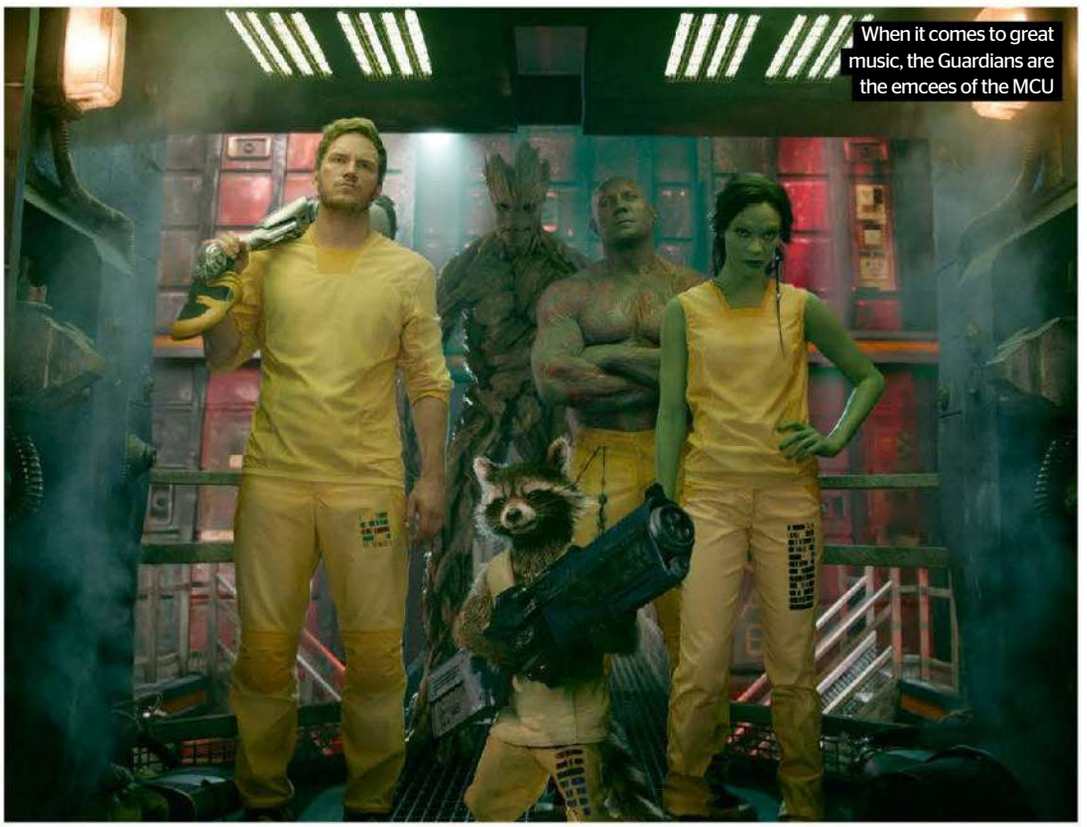


When it comes to great music, the Guardians are the emcees of the MCU

DISNEY, UNIVERSAL, WALT DISNEY RECORDS/PIXAR

CLASSIC SOUNDTRACK

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

TYLER BATES/VARIOUS MARVEL MUSIC, INC

To say 2014's *Guardians of the Galaxy* has a heart of part plastic is no criticism. It's parked on Peter Quill's hip, and worth getting tasered for. More than background or mood music, soundtrack album *Awesome Mix Vol. 1* is a narrative 'umbilical cord', says writer/director James Gunn – the connective tissue between Star-Lord and his late mum.

True, the movie also features stirring scoring from Tyler Bates, whose Gunn previous stretches back to 2006's *Slither*. (Or the Gunn-scripted *Dawn of the Dead*, if you like.) With some cues composed pre-shooting to set the on-screen mood, Leone/Morricone-style, Bates' *Guardian*-ship ranks among the MCU's most on-point scores 10 years on. The main theme and *The Ballad of the Nova Corps* serve heroic fanfares, robust and bursting. Elsewhere, Bates aces action gusto, starry-eyed sorrow, boot-stomp menace, cosmic chorales and – those gleaming Groot themes – celestial synths.

But the score belongs with its *Awesome* partner, as surely as the tree-of-few-words does with his verbose raccoon pal. Many of the songs had graced films before, the spiritual-sibling soundtrack of *Reservoir Dogs* (Scandi-rockers Blue Swede's *Hooked on a Feeling*) to *Boogie Nights* (the 'pelvic sorcery' of Elvin Bishop's *Fooled Around and Fell in Love*). But it's the way Gunn mixes AM-grade retro-rock, deep cuts and beyond that fuels *Guardians*' feels.

Escape (the Piña Colada Song) is a case in point: while Rupert Holmes sings of a romantic reunion, the song accompanies Quill's happy on-screen reunion with his Walkman. 10cc's low-gravity yacht-rock ballad *I'm Not in Love* matches the spaced-out, emotional free fall of the prologue, too, as Quill's mother dies.

Throughout, Gunn binds songs to their occasion. Redbone's *Come and Get Your Love* is now practically inseparable from Star-Lord's space-shuffle entrance, the defiant optimism of the Five Stairsteps' *O-o-h Child* from his last-ditch dance-off. The Jackson 5's *I Want You Back* takes exuberant root in Baby Groot's fledgling moves. David Bowie's glam-dram *Moonage Daydream* brings extra sprinklings of stardust, while The Runaways' *Cherry Bomb* ignites for its best on-screen use outside of Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused*. And some connoisseur-ish entries (the dapper Raspberries' quasi-garage nugget *Go All the Way*, say) are crate-digging curios, misfits matched to Gunn's motley crew.

Listeners happily (re)discovered them, making *Vol. 1* the first compilation soundtrack without an original song to hit the US Billboard No.1. Gunn's lack of irony surely helped its success, as did Marvin Gaye/Tammi Terrell's buoyant bridge to further adventures, *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*. Either way, Gunn's plastic-fantastic smash did Meredith Quill proud.

KEVIN HARLEY

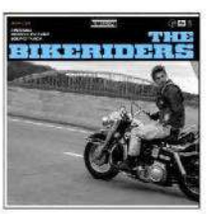
FRESH SPINS

Riley anxiety and easy riders...

INSIDE OUT 2

★★★★☆

Andrea Datzman (*Dug Days*) steps into long-time collaborator Michael Giacchino's shoes for the life of Riley. She's a fine fit, threading her predecessor's Riley themes through gusty guitars with teen vim. A new friendship theme twists malleably from joy to sorrow; a high-strung anxiety theme channels Bernard Herrmann smartly. And while Giacchino's wonkier abstractions are lost, the sense of maturing continuation on *Every Messy, Beautiful Part of Her* delivers a thoroughly winning trade off.



THE BIKERIDERS

★★★★☆

Jeff Nichols stacks up an on-point, Scorsese-grade jukebox mix for his biker drama. Most of the cuts channel the years between *The Wild One*/*Easy Rider*, with The Stooges barrelling raucously into the 70s. The rock'n'rollicking soul of Gary U.S. Bonds' *I Wanna Holler (but the Town's Too Small)* thrills, and Muddy Waters' bluesy *Mannish Boy* goes deep. But it's The Shangri-Las' harmonies on *Out in the Streets* that best evoke the desired spirit of yearning nostalgia.

GAMES PREVIEW

The ones to watch from the recent summer showcases...

LEGO HORIZON ADVENTURES

OUT TBC 2024 PC, PS5, SWITCH

Summer Game Fest organiser and compere Geoff Keighley downplayed expectations before the show – which presumably didn't please the publishers who'd spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to appear. The game in the opening slot said plenty enough: this light-hearted spin-off from Sony's post-apocalyptic sci-fi series Horizon wasn't quite the glossy blockbuster start we've seen in previous SGFs, while the announcement that it would be coming to PC and Switch was another reminder that the era of the format exclusive may soon be over… Yet this playful co-operative quest looks like bright, family-friendly fun, with self-serious lead Aloy on unusually breezy, wisecracking form.

PROJECT C

OUT TBC PC, CONSOLES

Among modern cinema's most prolific production houses, Blumhouse was never going to make a low-key entrance into video games. Already, there are no fewer than six horror-themed offerings on its roster – among them *Grave Seasons* (a twisted take on *Stardew Valley*) and *Sleep Awake*, the much-anticipated collaboration between *Spec Ops: The Line* director Cory Davis and Nine Inch Nails guitarist Robin Finck. But surely its most tantalising proposition is another team-up: *Immortality* director Sam Barlow has partnered with *Possessor*/*Infinity Pool* helmer Brandon Cronenberg for what promises to be the most twisted FMV (full-motion video) game to date.

UFO 50

OUT 18 SEPTEMBER PC

Spelunky creator Derek Yu spearheads a superteam of indie developers for this long-gestating retro project: a 50-game compilation representing the entire catalogue of a fictional 1980s console, the Lazer-X. Designed to reflect the development history of its 'creators', UFO Soft, the 'older' games in the package are more rudimentary, while the more advanced late-80s entries show a studio getting to grips with the hardware. From sports-themed options to RPGs, the games cover a broad span of genres, and many of them have multiplayer support. Others deliberately draw inspiration from the modern era – the in-universe excuse being that this visionary team was ahead of its time…

WANDERSTOP

OUT TBC 2024 PC, PS5

Davey Wreden, creator of the densely metatextual *The Stanley Parable* and *The Beginner's Guide*, returns with a game that, on the surface, looks like quite the departure from his previous works. It belongs squarely in the burgeoning subgenre of 'cosy' games: you run a fantastical tea shop, which involves a lot of menial tasks, such as gardening, harvesting and brewing. But these traditionally meditative rituals and processes take on a different meaning given you play as a warrior whose temperament is ill-suited to them. Trust Wreden to find a way to reframe these wholesome routines as a psychological challenge to overcome.

SONY, LEGO, BLUMHOUSE, MOSSMOUTH, ANNAPURNA, BETHESDA, REBELLION, KEPLER

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ATOMFALL

OUT 2025

PC, PS4/5, XBOX ONE/SERIES S/X

Loosely inspired by the 1957 Windscale disaster, this apocalyptic first-person adventure from the Oxford-based Rebellion imagines what the end of the world might look like with a distinctly British flavour – Fallout: Lake District, if you will. The setting alone helps set it apart from its contemporaries: on the surface, it's a world of cricket bats, Morris dancers, metal detectors, red telephone boxes and wicker effigies looming on grassy hilltops. But venture underground and you'll discover that the radioactivity has had more pronounced effects on the flora and fauna. Given it's from the team behind the Sniper Elite series, you can at least guarantee the gunplay will be satisfying.

DOOM: THE DARK AGES

OUT 2025 PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES S/X

Four years after the divisive *Doom Eternal*, id Software has gone back in time rather than back to basics. This grisly prequel equips the Doomslayer with his most inventive arsenal to date: there's a machine gun that crunches skulls into bullets, and a shield that can be revved up into a circular saw blade and thrown out like a deadly boomerang. Set in more expansive outdoor environments, the action scales up accordingly: when the forces of darkness get too much even for our brutish antihero, he can mount a dragon, capable of breathing fire down the gullets of these outsized beasts.

CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33

OUT 2025 PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES S/X

Inspired by the visual art of the Belle Époque era, the debut game from French studio Sandfall Interactive teased some of the most striking environments and enemy designs of the summer showcases. Its turn-based combat, bolstered by real-time elements that allow you to pull off parries and counters, looks thrillingly dynamic, too. But it's the game's killer premise that intrigues most. Your adventuring party is on a mission to kill the mysterious Paintress, who each year wakes to continue a deadly countdown – the descending numbers she paints will instantly wipe everyone of that age from existence. No pressure, then.

MIXTAPE

OUT 2025 PC, PS5, XBOX SERIES S/X

Three years ago, Aussie developer Beethoven & Dinosaur brought us psychedelic coming-of-ager/Ziggy Stardust origin story *The Artful Escape*. This follow-up has a similarly musical focus, but captures another pivotal life experience: the lazy days of one final summer spent with high-school friends. True, its grab-bag of nostalgic influences seems to be a little muddled – the soundtrack ranges from Devo to Smashing Pumpkins, while the eponymous 'tape' is a CD-R. But there's no denying the wistful pull of these magical-realist vignettes, whether you're careening downhill in a shopping trolley or sprinting and leaping impossible distances through endless fields. **CHRIS SCHILLING**

2 MORE

From Keanu to consoles...

THE BOOK OF ELSEWHERE

★★★☆☆

Deathless zen warriors, deer-pig cults, big words... This paired novel by Keanu Reeves and 'new weird' author China Miéville (*Kraken*) is a mutually on-brand haul of mixed intrigues. Immortal killer B could be Reeves' Wick/Neo combined; as B experiments on the 75,000-year-old babirusa to understand its secrets, Miéville's touch shows. Part gory, part cerebral, the results wobble between studiedly opaque, mildly 'whoa' and fitfully fun. Come for the teasing team-up, stay for the flights of fierce fancy and deadpan wit.

KEVIN HARLEY

A GUIDE TO MOVIE BASED VIDEO GAMES, 2001 ONWARDS

★★★☆☆

Following up his book tackling 1982-2000, writer Christopher Carton sets his sights on the world of film tie-ins from the past two decades. From PS1 to current consoles, it's a snapshot of how gaming has evolved, as well as licensing - gone are the days when seemingly every blockbuster got its own spin-off (The *Bee Movie Game*, anyone?). Categorised by franchise and genre, each title is diligently explored, even if there are some omissions - what, no *Batman Begins*?

JOEL HARLEY

Four decades of TMNT is celebrated in this expanded edition

BOOKS

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE ULTIMATE VISUAL HISTORY

★★★★☆ **ANDREW FARAGO** TITAN

For a 'visual history', there's no shortage of text in this revised edition coinciding with the Turtles' 40th anniversary. From their 1984 indie-comic inception to the pop-culture phenomenon they quickly became, the Turtles have been proven unexpectedly resilient.

This thorough tome contextualises every major iteration to date: comic crossovers, live-action movies, video games and a frankly bewildering amount of animated series. Seeing the simple iconography of mask-wearing, humanoid turtles repurposed for various eras is almost addictive - especially for anyone who ever doodled the half-shell heroes in the margins of their school books. Whichever TMNT you grew up with, only the most ardent completists will struggle to find something unfamiliar here.

But perhaps the most compelling aspect is the story of creators Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird: given the current appetite for 'product' movies (*BlackBerry* et al), it's easy to see the dramatic potential in the story of friends whose in-joke passion project brought superstar status and creative burnout. Author Farago's even-handed prose doesn't over-egg the drama, but candid quotes add colour, and the making-of story lacks a little spark when they're not involved.

So many years of reinvention can occasionally feel samey, and certain chapters could benefit from a more critical eye - the treatment of the Bay-produced movies feels particularly generous - but ending on the *Last Ronin* comics, *Mutant Mayhem* and upcoming animated series *Tales*... (see page 24) makes for a cowabunga conclusion (for now). **MATT MAYTUM**

THE CROW: THE LIFE, DEATH, AND REBIRTH OF A CLASSIC FILM

★★★★☆

BRIDGET BAISS APPLAUSE

Well-timed ahead of the upcoming Bill Skarsgård reboot, this revised and updated edition of Baiss' book explores the genesis of the 1994 cult actioner. Tragedy is a key theme, from James O'Barr's comic book (rooted in personal loss) to the on-set incident that claimed Brandon Lee's life. While much here is concerned with the star's death, every facet of the film and its legacy is rigorously explored, with vivid commentary from those involved. **JOEL HARLEY**

MOVIE MONSTERS OF THE DEEP

★★★★☆

FAITH ROSWELL WHITE OWL

'There will always be monster movies starring creatures from the deep,' says the author of this entertaining chronicle of a subaquatic subgenre whose memorable highs (*Jaws*, *The Shape of Water*) have been swamped by a shoal of lows (*Sharknado*, *Jaws: The Revenge*). Nessie and Godzilla are among the beasties that surface in a light-hearted yet well-researched tome that offers engaging answers to questions (eg, are mermaids monsters?) that have long tickled genre fans' minds. **NEIL SMITH**

STAR TREK: THE ILLUSTRATED ORAL HISTORY

★★★★☆

EDITED BY JONATHAN WILKINS TITAN

Series mastermind Gene Roddenberry leads the charge in a comprehensive look back at the original 60s series. Comprising archive interviews with the extended cast and crew, this glossy volume also takes in the animated spin-off show and six movies. It's not exactly undiscovered territory for Trekkies, but with sumptuous stills and concept art it adds up to a big, bold celebration of the franchise's first iteration. **JOEL HARLEY**

APPLAUSE, PENGUIN, TITAN, WHITE OWL

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CINEMA CELEBRATED AND DEBATED. BOOST YOUR MOVIE GENIUS TO SUPERHERO LEVELS...

IS IT BOLLOCKS?

Buff investigates the facts behind outlandish movie plots.

THIS MONTH UNDER PARIS' SHARK SCENARIO

Q In Netflix's *Under Paris*, a shark gets into the River Seine and reproduces via parthenogenesis. Jumping the shark?

A Daniel Abel, Professor of Marine Science, Coastal Carolina University, and author of several books including the forthcoming *Shark: The Illustrated Biography*.

'Thought you were safe from sharks when swimming in your favourite river? Bull*****! That is, bull shark! However, only four of the 550 or so kinds of sharks, including the bull shark, are known to inhabit freshwater ecosystems and none lives there full-time. (The harmless spiny dogfish reported in the River Thames occupied a section of the river that was brackish.) Most sharks, especially the amped-up shortfin mako of *Under Paris*, simply cannot function in freshwater and will avoid it.

'A healthy shortfin mako, an oceanic shark unaccustomed to confined spaces, plunked into the River Seine would die in short order from organ failure due to salt and water imbalance – not the river's legendary pollution. The absence of salts in freshwater also translates into less buoyancy, and thus a faster swimming speed would be needed to prevent the shark from sinking. Faster swimming means the mako would require more prey to feed its metabolic machinery, and the Seine ecosystem is sadly lacking in suitable prey, triathletes included. Furthermore, the physiological and anatomical specialisations required for sharks to inhabit freshwater ecosystems are so extreme that evolution did not favour them, and in no case could this suite of adaptations appear as fast as depicted in the movie.

'Parthenogenesis, or virgin birth, occurs among some animals, but it was unknown in sharks until reported for a captive bonnethead. It has subsequently been observed in multiple species of captive sharks, but never in a wild shortfin mako. The value of parthenogenesis is thought to be this: when males are scarce or separated from females, a generation of young can still be birthed. But before you consider a *Barbie* sequel without Ken, consider that parthenogenetic offspring are all females, and it also reduces genetic diversity, the raw material for evolution.'

VERDICT MOSTLY BOLLOCKS

ALTERNATIVE BOX OFFICE

The biggest movies... WITH ALIEN-ESQUE TITLES

01	**KNOCKED UP** 2007	$219.9M
02	**SPY KIDS 3-D: GAME OVER** 2003	$197.1M
03	**JAWS 2** 1978	$187.9M
04	**INSIDE MAN** 2006	$186M
05	**THE QUEEN** 2006	$124.9M
06	**PARKER** 2013	$46.9M
07	**MOTHER!** 2017	$44.5M
08	**MR. JONES** 1993	$8.3M
09	**RIPLEY'S GAME** 2002	$6.2M
10	**CITIZEN KANE** 1941	$1.7M

ON LOCATION REEL SPOTS BEHIND THE CAMERA

WHAT? In true-story dramedy *Fisherman's Friends*, the feel-good folk singers led by Jim (James Purefoy) frequent an idyllic pub on the north Cornwall coast.
WHERE? The Golden Lion, 10 Fore St, Port Isaac PL29 3RB
GO? This is an actual pub that's still occasionally visited by real members of the Fisherman's Friends, according to its website. Serving food, drink and possibly the occasional singsong.

ALAMY, DIMENSION, UNIVERSAL

Want us to investigate if a movie scenario is bollocks or snapped yourself at a film location? Contact us at totalfilm@futurenet.com

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KILLER MASKS

Facing up to death...

1 FRIDAY THE 13TH: PART III

It wasn't until 1983's threequel that Jason Voorhees settled on his signature hockey mask. In the original, the killer was his mom. In *Part II*, he wore a sack on his bonce. *Part VII* introduced the boiler suit to complete the famous outfit.

2 STAR WARS: EPISODE IV – A NEW HOPE

Darth Vader's mask features tech to keep him breathing (heavily). But as Darth Sidious says in *Star Wars: The Secrets of the Sith*, 'Few realised its true function as they were too fearful to see beyond its grim visage.'

3 BLACK SUNDAY

Mario Bava's gothic masterpiece is one of Tim Burton's favourite horror movies. It features witches, vampires and a horrific mask with spikes on the inside that's used as a gruesome implement of torture. This 1960 film wasn't released uncut in the UK until 1992.

4 HALLOWEEN

Production designer and editor Tommy Lee Wallace bought a Captain Kirk mask at a magic shop on Hollywood Boulevard, removed the eyebrows and sideburns, enlarged the eye holes and painted it white. Voilà: Michael Myers, features blank like his soul.

5 THE TEXAS CHAIN SAW MASSACRE

Tobe Hooper had Leatherface sport three different masks cut from his victims. Our favourite? 'Old Lady Mask', worn with an apron to perform domestic chores. 'The mask determined his personality,' said actor Gunnar Hansen.

6 THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS

Half a mask, twice the terror. With eyes burning and mouth barred, Anthony Hopkins' Hannibal the Cannibal never looks more frightening, or iconic, than when he's wheeled out to meet the senator whose daughter is missing.

7 PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE

Brian De Palma's rockbiz reimagining of *The Phantom of the Opera* sees William Finley wear a creepy metal-bird mask. Daft Punk cited *PotP* as a major influence and based their costumes on Finley's menacing antagonist.

8 THE DARK KNIGHT

Heath Ledger's Joker wears a clown mask during the opening heist. It's nothing special. A bit silly, in fact. So why on this so-serious list? Because it allows for the thrilling, chilling moment when he rips it off to reveal the grease-painted clown beneath.

9 POINT BREAK

Bank robbers The Ex-Presidents, led by Patrick Swayze's Ronald Reagan-masked Bodhi, don't mean to kill anyone, but things go inevitably south in the third act. To thrilling effect: 'It is 100% pure adrenalin,' gasped *The Hollywood Reporter*.

10 SCREAM

What's your favourite scary movie mask? Ghostface, riffing on Edvard Munch's famous composition, has to be up there. Over six movies, it's been donned by numerous psychos with a penchant for sharp knives and flappy flailing.

JAMIE GRAHAM

ALAMY

Did we miss something? Let us know on @totalfilm

REEL ESTATE

FOR SALE This remote Alpine chalet near Grenoble would be ideally suited to a professional writer who spends long periods working from home. Close to hiking trails, this duplex has been undergoing renovations that are not yet complete, but there's plenty of living space for a couple, one child and a dog. Adapted from an old Mauritian farmhouse, the property boasts splendid snowy views from its 1,400m elevation. Be aware, the attic is not completely soundproof, so is not the ideal spot from which to blast out steel-drum renditions of controversial rap songs. The attic window also requires some safety proofing: a fall from that height would be unambiguously fatal.

HINDSIGHT CORNER

JUDE LAW

SUPERMAN: FLYBY

November 2013

'[Was I nearly cast as Superman?] Myth! Myth!'

June 2023

'There was a process of flirtation [with the Superman role] going on… I tried [a costume] on and I looked in the mirror and part of me initially was like, "Wow, this would be a [good thing]," and then I just thought, "No, you can't – you can't do this. You can't."'

FLOP CULTURE

SUNSHINE

Danny Boyle's 2007 sci-fi thriller mounted tense stand-offs between ideas about science and faith. Was it misjudged, or just misunderstood?

Why it was a good idea (on paper)

The union between *28 Days Later*'s Danny Boyle (director) and Alex Garland (writer) looked set to go incendiary with this sci-fi intelli-thriller. Assembled presciently, a crack cast including Michelle Yeoh, Benedict Wong, Rose Byrne, Cliff Curtis, Chris Evans and – as a physicist named Robert – Cillian Murphy shone brightly.

What went wrong?

To bond his actors Method-style, Boyle had them share a dorm for two weeks pre-filming. On screen and off, *Sunshine* was more notable for a kind of dissonance. While the characters splinter on spiritual/rational divides, Boyle/Garland differed on how to tackle the film. Garland noted how his preference for 'reflection' and Boyle's stress on 'viscerality' produced a film of 'unresolved tensions'. Boyle used just one effects house to complete post-production, leading to delays. Eventually, a summer release and a limited US launch drew disappointing returns and reviews, perhaps little helped by an odd trailer promising sci-fi thrills to the tune of Clint Mansell's *Lux Aeterna*. Some critics claimed summer was bad timing for esoteric sci-fi about reigniting a dying sun, while many stressed one caveat: the film's scorched-slasher climax clashed with its reflective set-up.

Redeeming feature

Between the dazzling production designs, well-wrought script and visual metaphors of sun/sight, *Sunshine* meets its artful ambitions head-on. The John Murphy/Underworld score glistens with celestial awe and dread, bolstered by a whopping sound mix. And the climax isn't all off-piste: sun-sick psycho Pinbacker (Mark Strong) occupies the fanatical wing of the film's meditations on differing beliefs.

What happened next?

Boyle reignited with the Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*, Garland went solo, and most of the cast rocketed to stardom. Cult love bloomed, too, while Evans later lamented how few people saw the film.

Should it be remade?

Don't remake, revisit: Boyle's interstellar head trip roars with style and ambition. **KEVIN HARLEY**

BUDGET	BOX OFFICE	AWARDS	TF STAR RATING	ROTTEN TOMATOES
$40m	$35m	1	★★★½	77%

ALAMY, GETTY

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Powerhouse performance: Cruise with *Rain Man* co-star Dustin Hoffman

IS IT JUST ME OR IS TOM CRUISE AN UNDERRATED ACTOR?

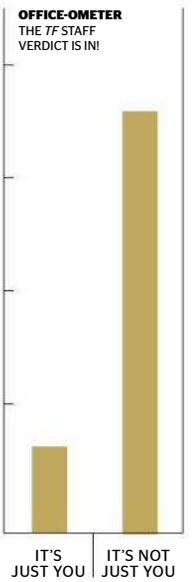
AXEL METZ
@AXELKMETZ

Few movie stars can match the career trajectory of Tom Cruise. Since establishing himself as box-office gold in the 80s, the actor hasn't stopped pumping out the hits. He successfully weathered a few PR blips in the early 00s, and became, according to Steven Spielberg, the man who 'saved Hollywood's ass' in the wake of the pandemic.

These days, the sexagenerian makes headlines for his daring stunt work, multimillion-dollar studio deals and fondness for Birmingham curry houses. But less is written about his standing as a truly exceptional performer.

Where early roles in *Top Gun*, *The Color of Money* (both 1986) and *Cocktail* (1988) proved Cruise's knack for playing young hotshots with charisma to burn, Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988) saw the actor tasked, for the first time, with carrying the emotional weight of a character-driven drama.

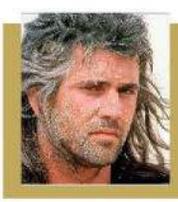
As Charlie Babbitt, a self-centred car salesman who embarks on a cross-country odyssey with his institutionalised brother, Cruise flexed his flair for cockiness while also demonstrating an ability to bring nuance to a role. Babbitt begins *Rain Man* as an unlikeable yuppie and ends it as an object of sympathy; Cruise makes us care for this deeply flawed individual – a trick he'd go on to pull in equally compelling performances throughout the 1990s.



With *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *A Few Good Men* (1992), *Jerry Maguire* (1996), *Eyes Wide Shut* and *Magnolia* (both 1999), Cruise earned his stripes as a bona-fide leading man capable of intensely emotional performances in action-free movies. *Mission: Impossible* (1996) may have kicked off his now-inescapable association with stunts and sprinting, but did any other actor bare their soul quite so frequently, and convincingly, as Cruise in the 90s?

I'm not suggesting that Tom Cruise is the greatest actor of all time. But he's among the most underrated and versatile actors of his generation, and it's high time more movie fans recognised that. Or is it just me?

Share your reaction at gamesradar.com/totalfilm or on Facebook and X/Twitter.



ALAMY, MGM

LAST TIME BEYOND THUNDERDOME: UNDERRATED?

KEITH HEENEY
It's underrated if you compare it to some of Hollywood's recent rubbish.

AARON KRUSTY STEVENSON
It's the lesser of five masterpieces.

DAMIEN HOWARD
It's not underrated. Nothing happens in it. Mel looks bored.

CHRISTOPHER SCOTT
It's a great film, just unfortunate to be sandwiched between two of the greatest action films ever made.

DHAWKMOON88
Anything with Tina Turner in it is underrated!

TOTAL FILM RETROSPECTIVE

DEEP BLUE SEA

Twenty-five years since a pack of 'gliding monsters' chewed through an underwater laboratory's crew, director Renny Harlin and *Buff* rewind to a time of techno tangibility. **WORDS DAN SEDDON**

Being a real ocean enthusiast and shark conservationist, I didn't want to do an exploitation movie about sharks being bad,' remembers prolific Finnish filmmaker Renny Harlin. To combat this moral quandary, his first move was to reject a project similar to future Jason Statham adventure *The Meg*, yet something was in the Hollywood water and Harlin seemingly couldn't escape these aquatic apex predators.

Fortunately for him, the *Deep Blue Sea* script, finalised by couple Donna and Wayne Powers, genetically enhanced the villains of the piece and thus provided its director with 'peace of mind' – the characters would be the architects of their own downfall. Bolstered by a game cast of Thomas Jane, Saffron Burrows, Jacqueline McKenzie, Samuel L. Jackson, LL Cool J, Michael Rapaport and Stellan Skarsgård, 1999's *Deep Blue Sea* infused the shark-attack subgenre with real-world concerns as a team of scientists experiment on makos in a bid to cure Alzheimer's disease. Solidifying its B-movie status, the brains of the animals quintuple in size, and so when the time is perfect to strike, they strategically flood the team's facility and hunt down their keepers.

According to Harlin, who by coincidence is finishing his second shark flick *Deep Water* as we speak – 'It's looking fantastic, we are just doing visual effects for it' – studio Warner Bros. coughed up $10m for the construction of *Deep Blue Sea*'s animatronic creatures. The big boy of the group was 25 feet in length, ran on a thousand-horsepower engine and could swim, circle and dive while holding actors in its jaws. This was much more sophisticated technology than that employed by Steven Spielberg in the 70s, but still, 'when they break down they break down, and then you have no idea what to do'.

The tangible horror of his 25-year-old film is indebted to these creations; whipping down flooded corridors and thrashing articulated tails as their human targets splash away in desperation, seeking refuge in empty ovens and atop office furniture.

'I think what was different about *Deep Blue Sea* was that we had a budget – not a giant budget but a good budget – and we built these mechanical sharks so that we could actually

ALAMY

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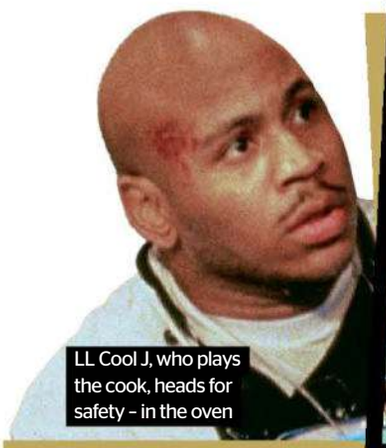
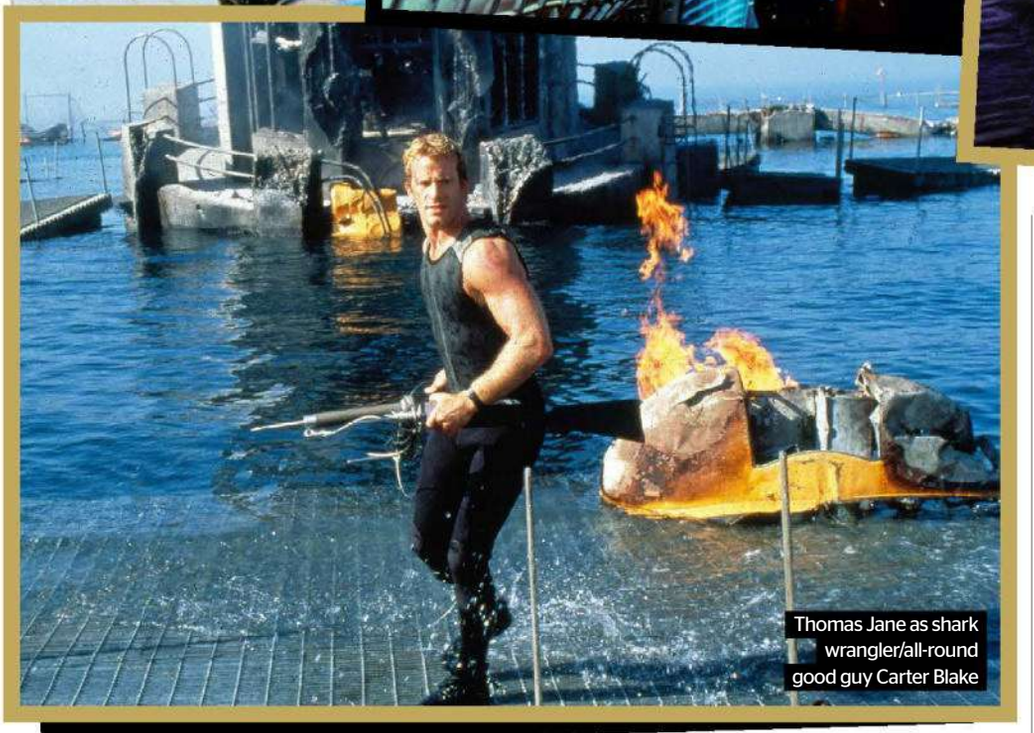

LL Cool J, who plays the cook, heads for safety – in the oven

Carter comes face to face with a genetically enhanced mako shark

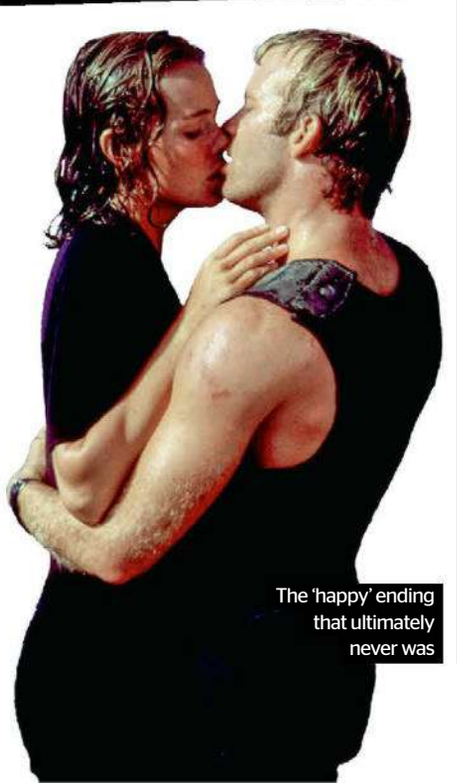
Saffron Burrows stars as the nefarious Dr. McAlester


Thomas Jane as shark wrangler/all-round good guy Carter Blake

show them – not just make the audience guess what's there,' reflects the director, who was determined to place the cat-and-mouse chase in relatable locations for viewers.

'I found it fascinating that the sharks are inside the humans' environment. I was really particular that, even if we are at a high-tech station in the middle of the ocean, anywhere we could make it feel like it's a shark in your home, the better. So sharks in hallways, offices, in a kitchen – I'll totally admit I looked at movies like *Alien*.'

Although the plan to blend real shark footage into the film was mostly binned, Harlin and his crew did venture out to the Bahamas to witness these killing machines in all of their glory, but the trip wasn't without its scares. 'One camera assistant got bitten,' he tells *Buff*, with the individual in question ignoring the diving instructor's advice to keep his hands close to his body when underwater. 'There was a video cable that came up from our support boat into the camera and it got somehow entangled, and so he swam there and reached out to pull the cable and at the same time, boom! The tiger shark just took his hand. It let go quickly but it just started bleeding like crazy and everybody was like, "Get out of the water!"'


The 'happy' ending that ultimately never was

In an iconic twist halfway through the film, Jackson's corporate suit Russell Franklin isn't so lucky. While he's delivering a motivational speech next to a sea portal, one of the massive makos explodes from the depths to claim him. Such was the moment's effect on test audiences, studio execs wanted to put it smack bang in the middle of the trailer.

'There were those who argued you can't give away the key surprise of the movie, and I happened to be one of those,' says Harlin. 'It worked great because it was such a shocker, but there are those who think if we had let the audience know that there's something so crazy in this movie it could've multiplied our [box-office] results.'

Out of the American test screenings also came *Deep Blue Sea*'s revised ending. Dr. Susan McAlester (Burrows) originally survived and even cosied up to Carter (Jane), but the people weren't having it.

'Literally there were [test] cards where they'd carved, "Kill the bitch!"' Harlin reveals, still surprised by the response. 'We had a strong, beautiful, assertive woman with an English accent leading the charge, and the audience felt that ultimately what happened was her fault and her blind ambition caused whatever happened. It made the audience hate her.'

The customer's always right… Right?

DEEP BLUE SEA IS AVAILABLE ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL.

REEL LIFE

INTERMISSION

A WRITER TAKES PAUSE TO CONSIDER...

How his life is measured in movies

MATT MAYTUM
@MATTMAYTUM

When it comes to reflecting on any significant events in my life, they're all marked by movie release dates. If I'm trying to recall my age at a certain pivotal moment, I'll always work backwards to get the year by thinking about the films I was seeing at the cinema at that time. Forget Proust's madeleine – a cinema ticket stub from 1999 is my preferred form of time travel.

I don't know exactly how this gift/affliction began. I recall seeing *Beauty and the Beast* – or, rather, not seeing it as we queued round the block and got turned away on our first attempt – as a seven-year-old in 1991. Similarly, my most vivid cinema memory is watching *Jurassic Park* when I'd just turned nine. I was in the sweet spot of being old enough to get that the film was a big deal, but young enough to be completely, utterly and uncynically swept up in it.

But the phenomenon that I mean to express here began in the summer of 1996. My interest in films was developing from 'whatever my parents sat me down in front of' to actively seeking out films I wanted to see. In this case, it was the one-two punch of *Mission: Impossible* and *Independence Day*, films made all the more giddily exciting because I saw them parent-free with mates (!) at the newly opened Virgin cinema (!) where allocated seating (!), surround sound (!) and self-service drinks dispensers (!) promised an exciting future for this fledgling cinemagoer. No wonder I'd spend the rest of my life hanging around these places.

And for the rest of my life, milestones would be marked out like this. I'll always remember that summer as the one just after I'd finished my first year at secondary school, and the two friends I saw those films – and dissected them endlessly – with. (One remains one of my closest friends; the other emigrated to Australia a year later, never to be heard from again.)

It comes in handy when filling out forms. When did I start university? Well, I fondly remember seeing *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* with a housemate during the first Christmas break, so it must've been 2003. When did I leave my ungratifying first proper job? It was summer 2008, the same time *The Dark Knight* came out.

> 'The pandemic years are such a blur to me: how the hell was I supposed to keep track of time passing?'

How long ago did *Bruce Almighty*, *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* and *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde* open? Twenty-one years ago this year. I know that off the top of my head because they were some of the first dates my now-wife and I went on (even though I'm glad that the relationship stood the test of time better than those films did).

As a Christopher Nolan devotee, it was weirdly pleasing to me that both of my children emerged into the world the same years as two of the master filmmaker's movies did. 'Dunkirk' is just about to start junior school, while 'Tenet' is nearly four (there was no Oppenbaby).

Being lucky enough to have the job I have has only intensified this way of looking at the world. My working life has revolved around the film release calendar for more than a decade, and those years are easiest for me to navigate when I think about what we were putting on the cover, or the interviews or reviews I might have been doing inside. It's probably why the pandemic years are such a blur to me: with almost nothing in the way of film releases to refer to, how the hell was I supposed to keep track of time passing?

It's one of many reasons I hope the big-screen experience endures. I can't see core memories becoming entangled with a Mark Wahlberg actioner dropping on Netflix, to be forgotten before the weekend is out.

And, it's not even just a tool for looking back. My life has always been oriented around upcoming releases as well. Not just looking ahead in the current year, but beyond that, too. However grim the state of the world might be, there's always a movie I'll be looking forward to with optimism. I'm grateful to James Cameron for staking Avatar flags so far into the future. I'm not the biggest fan of the franchise, but it's exciting to think that when *Avatar 5* opens in 2031, 'Dunkirk' and 'Tenet' might be old enough to appreciate it with me.

Most keenly of all I'm looking forward to Richard Linklater's *Merrily We Roll Along*, a passion-project adaptation of Stephen Sondheim's musical that'll shoot over the course of 20 years, so that the time-spanning story can be told in reverse chronological order with the cast de-aging naturally. Whether I'll have any more films to tick off after that, who knows? But I hope the big-screen experience outlives me, to make sure that I'll always have another film to look forward to.

ALAMY

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MILLA JOVOVICH

Elemental spirit...

MODEL BEHAVIOUR

Born in Ukraine and raised in Los Angeles, Milica Bogdanovna Jovovich rose to fame as a model, taking on assignments from the age of 12. Her first major acting credit was as co-lead of *Return to the Blue Lagoon* (1991), a film notorious for its teenage nudity (and 0% Rotten Tomatoes rating). Disappointed at much of her work being cut from Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1993), she took a hiatus from acting and moved to Europe.

FACING THE MUSIC

Before resuming her film career, Jovovich found modest success in the music industry. In 1994, she released her debut album, *The Divine Comedy*, which brought a modern pop feel to Ukrainian folk songs. Breakout track *Gentlemen Who Fell* featured in 2002's *The Rules of Attraction*; Jovovich has also contributed music to some of her own films, including Wim Wenders' *The Million Dollar Hotel* (2000) and *Dummy* (2002).

BESSON EFFORTS

Jovovich returned to acting with a star-making turn in Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997), earning a number of awards nominations (including, unjustly, a Razzie nod). She reunited with Besson (to whom she was briefly married) for biopic *Joan of Arc* (1999). As her action-hero credentials began to stack up, she showcased range in the likes of Spike Lee's *He Got Game* (1998) and Michael Winterbottom's *The Claim* (2001).

ALICE SPRINGS

'I thought it was the coolest, darkest most underground thing ever – a female-driven video game with zombies,' Jovovich said of the 1996 survival horror on which Paul W.S. Anderson's *Resident Evil* (2002) is based. To play Alice – a character who doesn't appear in the games – Jovovich trained extensively in karate, kickboxing and gunplay. She became the face of the franchise, starring in five sequels (2004-16).

COURSE OF ACTION

Jovovich retained her genre crown by starring in *Ultraviolet* (2006) and *Survivor* (2015) while branching out with villain roles in Neil Marshall's *Hellboy* (2019) and *Zoolander 2* (2016). The star has also continued to collaborate with husband Paul W.S. Anderson on popcorn action films *The Three Musketeers* (2011) and *Monster Hunter* (2020). She remains as active as ever, appearing in this year's *Breathe* and the upcoming *World Breaker*, alongside Luke Evans.

JOEL HARLEY

KEY MOVIES

THE FIFTH ELEMENT 1997

★★★★★

Speaking a made-up language, Jovovich thoroughly convinces as Leeloo, and later described the runaway alien as her favourite role.

JOAN OF ARC 1999

★★★★★

Besson's uneven biopic is elevated by a suitably intense Jovovich as the iron-clad, bowl-cut-sporting Maid of Orleans.

RESIDENT EVIL 2002-16

★★★★★

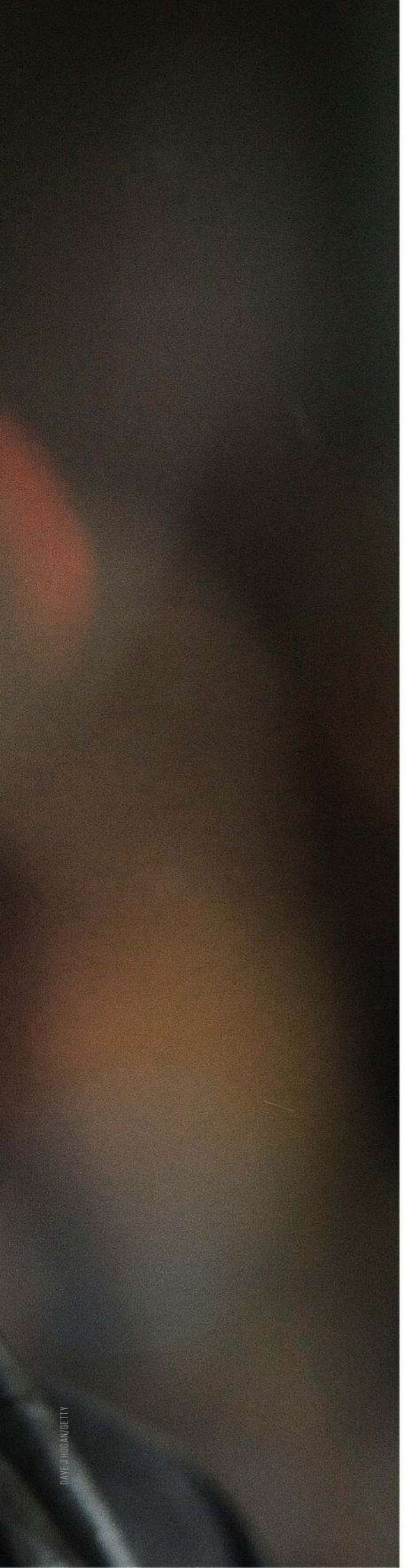
Six entries in the zombie-fighting series may have been overkill, but Jovovich's grit and charisma kept audiences invested.

STONE 2010

★★★★★

Jovovich gives her dramatic skills a rigorous workout in this psychological crime thriller led by Robert De Niro and Edward Norton.

20TH CENTURY STUDIOS, ALAMY, DISNEY, LIONSGATE, REAL GONE MUSIC, SIGNATURE, SONY, SPIRIT ENTERTAINMENT, STUDIOCANAL



DAVE J HOGAN/GETTY

1935-2024

DONALD SUTHERLAND

When it was announced, in September 2017, that Donald Sutherland was to be awarded an honorary Oscar, he said, 'I don't deserve this. But I have arthritis and I don't deserve that either.'

Sutherland, who died on 20 June, aged 88, most certainly *did* deserve his golden statue, and it was to the Academy's shame that he was never otherwise so much as nominated despite lighting up such classic films as *M*A*S*H* (1970), *Klute* (1971), *Don't Look Now* (1973), *Ordinary People* (1980) and *JFK* (1991). Instead he had to content himself with winning an Emmy for TV movie *Citizen X* (1995), concerning the hunt for Soviet serial killer Andrei Chikatilo, and two Golden Globes, again for *Citizen X* and for Lyndon B. Johnson-era political drama *Path to War* (2002).

Born in New Brunswick, Canada, Donald McNichol Sutherland was a sickly child. He spent most of his teenage years in Nova Scotia, before graduating from the University of Toronto with a double major in engineering and drama. Thankfully he pursued acting, studying at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, and gaining experience with the Perth repertory company. TV roles in *The Saint* and *The Avengers* followed, and he also appeared in genre films *Castle of the Living Dead* (1964), Amicus anthology *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors* and *Die! Die! My Darling!* (both 1965). He was cast to be in the background group of Robert Aldrich's 1967 men-on-a-mission war adventure *The Dirty Dozen*, but moved forward when Clint Walker balked at Aldrich's direction.

It was playing irreverent army surgeon Hawkeye Pierce in Robert Altman's anarchic satire *M*A*S*H* that made Sutherland a star. Dustin Hoffman had ushered in a new kind of Hollywood hero when he weaselled his way through 1969's *Midnight Cowboy*, and suddenly Sutherland – gangly of frame and droopy of face, with pale eyes and prominent ears – became a counterculture icon. He excelled opposite Jane Fonda and Julie Christie in, respectively, neo-noir *Klute* and mournful horror *Don't Look Now*, and also impressed as repressed loner Homer Simpson in *The Day of the Locust* (1975), as a fascist foreman in Bernardo Bertolucci's epic *1900* (1976) and as the title character of *Fellini's Casanova* (also 1976). And who could forget that pointed finger and chilling scream with which his everyman closed out Philip Kaufman's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1978)?

While the 70s was Sutherland's time, he continued to fashion memorable work throughout the following decades, the highlights being his bereaved father in *Ordinary People*, his conspiracy-spouting extended cameo in *JFK*, playing a tender Mr. Bennet in Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), and as the autocratic President Coriolanus Snow in the first four Hunger Games movies (2012-2015).

Posting to alert people of Sutherland's passing, son Kiefer (*24*, *The Lost Boys*) said, 'He loved what he did and did what he loved.' And we loved watching him do it. **JAMIE GRAHAM**

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GOLDEN GRAHAMS

Editor-at-Large Jamie Graham unearths underrated classics...

THIS MONTH
Phase IV

What do *The Man with the Golden Arm*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, *Spartacus*, *West Side Story*, *Broadcast News*, *Big*, *Goodfellas* and *Casino* all have in common? Their title sequences are the work of graphic designer Saul Bass, whose legendary career in movies ran from 1954 to 1996.

But Bass only ever directed one feature, *Phase IV* (1974). A failure at the box office that was largely dismissed by critics ('interminable,' sniffed *Variety*), it's a strange hybrid of two genres that were prevalent as the time: intelligent, ideas-driven science-fiction (*The Andromeda Strain*, *Silent Running*, *Soylent Green*), the like of which held sway before *Star Wars* insisted on spectacle; and the revenge-of-nature B-movies (*Frogs*, *Night of the Lepus*, *Killer Bees*) that tapped into growing ecological fears. Also in the heady mix is a touch of cosmic horror as Bass highlights the insignificance of human beings in the grand scheme of things.

Phase IV is set in the desert of Arizona, where scientists Dr. Ernest Hubbs (Nigel Davenport) and James Lesko (Robert Altman favourite Michael Murphy) are holed up in a small research station to monitor a shift in the local ant population. In the wake of unexplained solar activity, some sort of evolutionary change is occurring, with the ants having seemingly destroyed all of their natural predators – spiders, scorpions, millipedes – and developed their collective intelligence. They attack the only occupied house in the area, forcing Hubbs and Lesko to take in sole survivor Kendra (Lynne Frederick). She will, it transpires, have a key role to play, but for now our men of science are fretting over whether it's best to try to communicate with the ants, or eradicate them. 'So defenceless in the individual, so powerful in the mass,' murmurs Hubbs, who fears their mutation will put humanity under threat.

Phase IV is slow-moving and its ending ambiguous. Paramount had major reservations, working with Bass to make the $1m picture more user-friendly by adding voiceover (spoken by Lesko) and lopping off the last five minutes – a whacked-out, psychedelic montage influenced by Salvador Dalí's surrealist artwork and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The film still works in its truncated theatrical cut, ideas and message intact, but the ambitious sequence (thought lost until 2012) is included on 101 Films' Blu-ray. It's stunning, an eruption of symbolic WTF images that map humankind becoming subservient to ant overlords.

The whole film, in fact, is visually arresting, splicing wildlife photographer Ken Middleham's macro footage of ants with Dick Bush's handsomely lensed narrative sequences, and showcasing Bass' gift for imagery. Unlike the atomic bug movies of the 50s, *Phase IV* doesn't have the scientists win the day, with Lesko left to ponder the ants 'taking over the countryside first, then laying siege to towns and cities'. It is, in its way, as downbeat as the endings of *Night of the Living Dead* or *Easy Rider*, but then perhaps it's only right that our egotistical, competitive species falls to a force that is all about the collective. If humans die out, nature will live on. Something to think about as climate change threatens to sound our death knell.

See this if you liked...

THEM! 1954
Radioactive ants grow to the size of buses in the best of the 50s giant-bug movies.

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY 1968
Kubrick's masterpiece is a big influence on *Phase IV*, in structure, ideas and bat-shit finale.

ASSAULT ON PRECINCT 13 1976
Bass' film turns into a siege movie when the ants target the scientists' research station.

ARACHNOPHOBIA 1990
Plenty of (eight-legged) eeks as a new species of killer spider crawls all over a Californian town.

ONE MORE...
THE HELLSTROM CHRONICLE 1971
Faux-doc showing how insects could take over. Done so well it won the Best Documentary Oscar!

JAMIE WILL RETURN NEXT ISSUE...
FOR MORE RECOMMENDATIONS, FOLLOW @JAMIE_GRAHAM9 ON X/TWITTER

ALAMY

THE TF BRAIN

SPIDER-MOVIES

Heroes! Villains! Librarians! Test your knowledge of Spidey's live-action adventures...

EASY

1 Which is the highest-grossing Spider-Man movie to date?
2 What new, simian nickname does Ned give Spidey in *Far from Home*?
3 Which actor filmed scenes as Mary Jane Watson that ended up being cut from *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*?
4 At the end of *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, Cap gives a lecture on what theme?
5 Which was the first Spider-flick to make more than $1b at the box office?

MEDIUM

1 The *Amazing Spider-Man 2*'s end credits feature a teaser clip from which non-Spider movie?
2 In which Spider-movie does Stan Lee play a librarian?
3 What is the full name of Zendaya's character in the Homecoming trilogy?
4 Sandman gains his powers by falling into what type of machine?
5 *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* introduced Felicia Hardy... What is the character's costumed alias in the comics?

HARD

1 Three actors have played Flash Thompson in the Spider-movies... Name them.
2 And what's the full title of Flash's memoir (as seen in *No Way Home*)?
3 Which Spider-movie has received the highest number of Oscar nominations to date... and how many?
4 In *Spider-Man 3*, what's the name of the show in which MJ makes her Broadway debut?
5 In *Far from Home*, what do the initials 'BFP' stand for on Peter Parker's suitcase?

ANSWERS: EASY - 1. *SPIDER-MAN: NO WAY HOME*. 2. NIGHT MONKEY. 3. SHAILENE WOODLEY. 4. 'PATIENCE'. 5. *SPIDER-MAN: FAR FROM HOME*. **MEDIUM** - 1. *X-MEN: DAYS OF FUTURE PAST*. 2. *THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN*. 3. MICHELLE JONES-WATSON. 4. A PARTICLE ACCELERATOR. 5. BLACK CAT. **HARD** - 1. JOE MANGANIELLO, CHRIS ZYLKA, TONY REVOLORI. 2. *FLASHPOINT: A MEMOIR - MY LIFE AS PETER PARKER'S BEST FRIEND*. 3. *SPIDER-MAN 2*, THREE NODS. 4. *MANHATTAN MEMORIES*. 5. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN PARKER.

SONY

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NAME THE FRAME

Can you guess the eight movies which these sci-fi spaceships appear in?

1

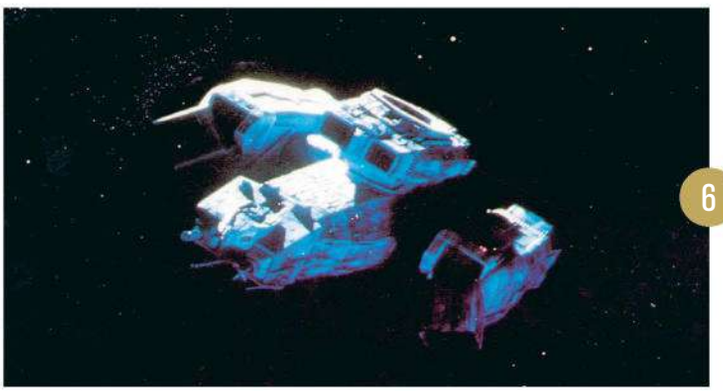
2

3

4

5

6



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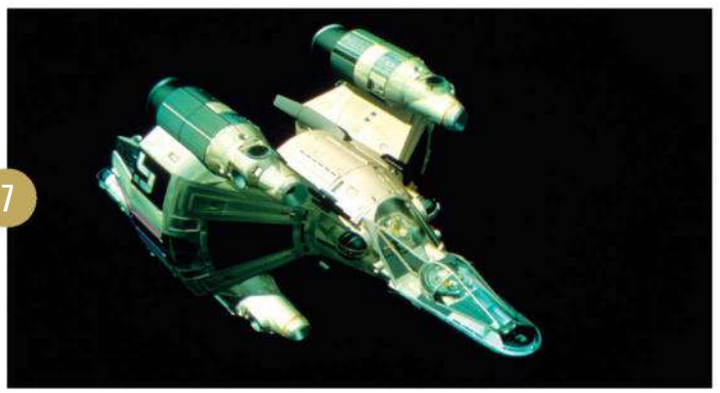

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ALAMY

ANSWERS: 1. THE BLACK HOLE. 2. EVENT HORIZON. 3. PANDORUM. 4. FLASH GORDON. 5. THE THING. 6. ALIEN. 7. THE LAST STARFIGHTER. 8. DISTRICT 9.

Dialogue

Mail, rants, theories etc.

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★ STAR LETTER

I just rewatched the original *Jurassic Park* for the first time in two decades. I was blown away by how much tension I felt, due to the characters being so well-drawn, which made me care about them. On the other hand, watching the recent *Jurassic World* films, I felt none of that. There's not an ounce of bloat in the entire first *Park*. I believe it needed to be a one-and-done production. I feel the same about *The Matrix*, *Joker* and *Squid Game*. Any others that you guys think should also stand proudly alone?
MICHAEL DEMETRIOU, CRAWLEY

Another Spielberg movie starting with J springs to mind: 1975's *Jaws*. Mind you, *Jaws: The Revenge* must've done something 'right', having put filmmakers off going back in those waters ever since 1987. Shame, though, that we've never had *Minority Report: Addendum*, *The Bigger, Friendlier Giant* or *Infinity War Horse*. Michael and everyone with a letter printed here will receive a copy of the (original!) *Point Break*, available on 4K UHD, BD, DVD and digital on 5 August via Icon Film Distribution. Didn't send an address? Email it! Or miss the Bigelow picture!

KIND OF UNIMPRESSED

I'm sorry, guys, but I've seen *Kinds of Kindness* and I just didn't get it. Is it me, or am I missing something? I've put my thoughts into verse: There was a movie director called Lanthimos/Whose films were surreal, absurd and morose/His actors' speech was all stilted/Deadpan, ponderous and wilted/Yet cinema critics seem to get all lachrymose.
CONFUSED OF CALVERLEY

No need to apologise to us; we weren't fans either. Our reviewer called it 'a hollow affair' and awarded it two stars – not our harshest rating, but a good three stars lower than previous Lanthimos/Stone team-ups. Not since Pacino/De Niro's *Righteous Kill* have two collaborators so jeopardised their batting (or rather box-set) average.

You *really* don't want to know what the flashing light means

@ozzydogg
[ON *A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE*] 'I really enjoyed it [but] didn't realise cats can hold their breath for so long...'

INNARDS VISION

I watched *Inside Out 2* and it got me thinking, *Inside Out* would be better used as a title for a slasher film. What other kids' film titles should be recycled for horror? There have to be others... anyone??
BERNIE NG, VIA EMAIL

We can definitely see *IO* as a slasher flick ('Who's your friend who likes to slay? Bing Bong, Bing Bong...'). As for other horror-ready titles, *Five Children and It* is the one that takes top prize (a paper sailboat, claimable from your nearest storm drain). But how about all the grown-up titles that sound moppet-friendly? *Wishmaster*, *Candyman*, *Magic Mike*...

LOVE YOU, TOMORROW

Has anyone else ever suffered from seeing a wonderful film that's left them wondering when they'll get to see another one of the same quality? Although reviews of *There's Still Tomorrow* made it sound terrific, I didn't expect to be so overwhelmed by a black-and-white film, especially a foreign-language one. I found it innovative, funny, incisive, thought-provoking, heartbreaking... Any suggestions for what I should see next?
STEPHEN MCCARTHY, GLASGOW

Well, there's plenty more black-and-white and/or foreign-language films

WHAT YOU MISSED ON THE POD LAST MONTH

Exclusive interviews with Lupita Nyong'o, Joseph Quinn, Viggo Mortensen, the talent behind *The Acolyte* and more. Cinema's greatest westerns, hit men and motorcycles. Plus reviews and more, every week!

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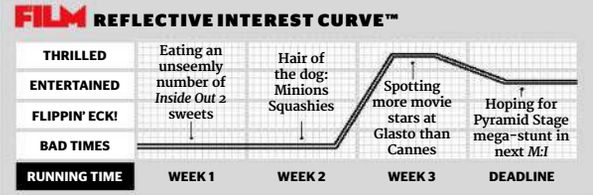

ICON, DISNEY, PAULA DEXTER

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OFFICE SPACED

CHATTER 'GEMS' OVERHEARD IN THE *TOTAL FILM* OFFICE THIS MONTH...

* 'If was in *Bikeriders* I'd be the one pottering about on a Sunday drive, not tearing up the highway'
* **'Lemon curd is way better than marmalade. Fight me, Paddington!'**

out there; your good pal *TF* is always here to alert you to the finest examples. But we know the feeling of which you speak. In our jobs we also have the reverse: seeing a total dud one week that leaves us fearful it'll be something even worse next week, like an extended cut of *Madame Web* with 20 more minutes of standing around in the woods waiting for the plot to turn up.

FOREVER FRIENDS

I just watched *IF* – so heartwarming, colourful and funny (especially 'Keith'). I don't watch many family/animated movies in the cinema, as I usually want to see something big, spectacular and full of action. But *IF* was worth it. I laughed and cried and was so happy with the ending. Maybe this is actually a movie for adults? For us to remember and never forget how our childhoods made us and what was important. I'm calling all IFs to come back to us! Please! (just not 'Keith', haha).

MAJA MICHIEWICZ, NEW MILTON

@washedjohn

[ON *THE ACOLYTE*'S TWIST] 'Most predictable reveal ever. I've seen *Scooby-Doo* episodes with larger twists.'

Another month, another letter praising *IF*... If our two-star review (see *TF* 351) was an imaginary friend it would be moping around all over reader-land, lost and rejected and desperate to bond with just one disappointed punter.

MAGS THAT MATTER

We are having a war-movie season at home and I fancied watching *Full Metal Jacket* for the Vietnam choice (my husband already knows *Platoon* off by heart!). Found it today at a local car-boot sale for 50p and was impressed/interested to find a mini-magazine still in the box: *Your Guide to the Movies That Matter*. My favourite in the mag was *Heat*, with *The Matrix* (one of the most recent films included) also up there. Got me thinking, it's been nearly 25 years, so what would make it into a new version? So many amazing, groundbreaking films, I wouldn't know where to start.

PAULA DEXTER, ROMSEY

Us plus Stanley Kubrick for only half a quid?!? Someone needs to contact *Bargain Hunt* pronto. We did a legacy sequel of sorts last year with a Warner-themed behind-the-scenes supplement (see *TF* 341); post-*Matrix* entries included *Barbie*, *Inception* and enough Dark Knights to make crime take the next quarter-century off.

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60 SECOND SCREENPLAY

SPOILER ALERT!

TF SAVES YOU THE COST OF A MOVIE EVERY MONTH. THIS ISSUE: KINGDOM OF THE PLANET OF THE APES...

WORDS MATT LOOKER

FADE IN:

EXT. FOREST
Many generations after CAESAR's death in the last film, apes are still the dominant species on the planet thanks to their superior intellect. And yet, NOA is part of a clan that collects eggs.

NOA
Father, Master of Birds, we have collected our eggs for the ritual, but we saw a human!

NOA'S FATHER
We must tell the Elders right away for some reason!

NOA discovers the human hiding on site. She accidentally crushes the eggs. Suddenly, a group of apes led by a gorilla named SYLVA attacks everyone.

SYLVA
I don't really understand this whole bird-egg thing, so I'm just going to burn the whole place to the ground.

NOA'S FATHER
No! I must save the birds! And probably some of my people. Maybe even my family.

NOA finds his father dead and his clan captured. He vows to rescue them and tries to get an eagle to land on his wrist. It doesn't. Then he immediately falls down a big hole.

RAKA
I'm an old orangutan and I made that trap. I'm friendly to humans because Caesar liked them. I'm a big fan of his.

They team up to find NOA's clan and realise the human from before is following them. RAKA names her 'NOVA'. Suddenly SYLVA's gang attacks. They escape after NOVA reveals she can speak.

NOVA
I can actually converse quite proficiently. Some humans just pretend not to because it's safer that way. Also, my real name is Mae.

RAKA
But I named you Nova? This is already confusing. Oh well. At least you're safe.

They are attacked again by SYLVA. RAKA is swept away by dangerous rapids while NOA and NOVA/MAE are captured.

NOA
Looks like we are going to where my clan is held, so that's helpful.

EXT: BEACH
NOA finds his family who are now slaves trying to open a big vault for evil ape ruler PROXIMUS CAESAR. NOA and NOVA/MAE are invited to a formal dinner. WILLIAM H. MACY appears.

PROXIMUS CAESAR
Enjoy your starters! By the way, that vault contains information that will provide instant evolution for apes, even though I have no idea what it might be.

PROXIMUS warns NOA against trusting NOVA/MAE. NOA doesn't know what to think, but then an eagle finally lands on his wrist and he has instant leadership skills.

NOVA/MAE
I want to get inside that vault because it contains a book that will help humans learn to speak, even though we already can.

INT: VAULT
NOVA/MAE somehow has explosives to break into the vault. It turns out to be a military bunker filled with weapons. NOVA/MAE secretly takes a satellite key. WILLIAM H. MACY dies.

PROXIMUS CAESAR
Ah-ha! I am holding your friends hostage! Now give me all the weapons so I can rule over the apes like I already do.

NOVA/MAE sets off explosives to flood the entire area and runs away. NOA fights and eventually kills SYLVA and then gets his clan to summon their eagles to kill PROXIMUS.

NOA
You underestimated me! I am now the Master of Birds! Hmm, that doesn't sound so impressive now after all these explosions.

EXT: FOREST
NOA leads his clan back to their home. NOVA/MAE visits to say goodbye.

NOVA/MAE
This is a big step for humans and apes. The important thing is that we have established trust.

NOVA/MAE takes the satellite key to a secret human military base where they use it to communicate with other secret human military bases around the world.

NOA
I look forward to humans and apes living side by side without any issues. What could go wrong?

FIN

NEXT ISSUE: BAD BOYS: RIDE OR DIE

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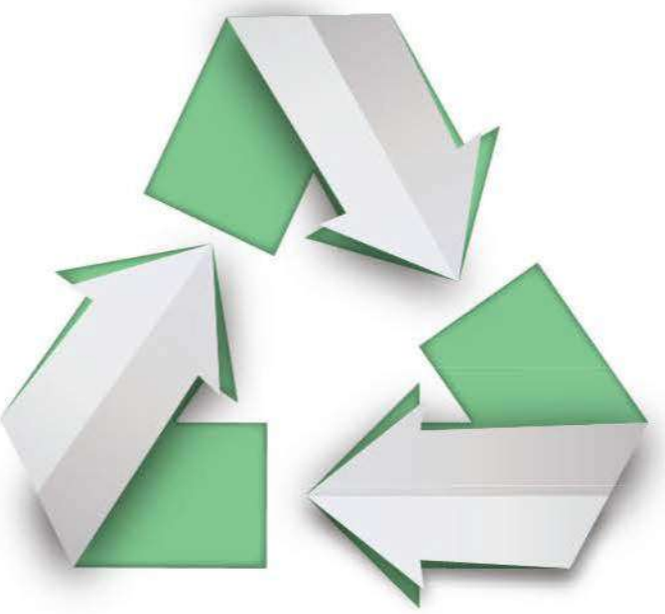

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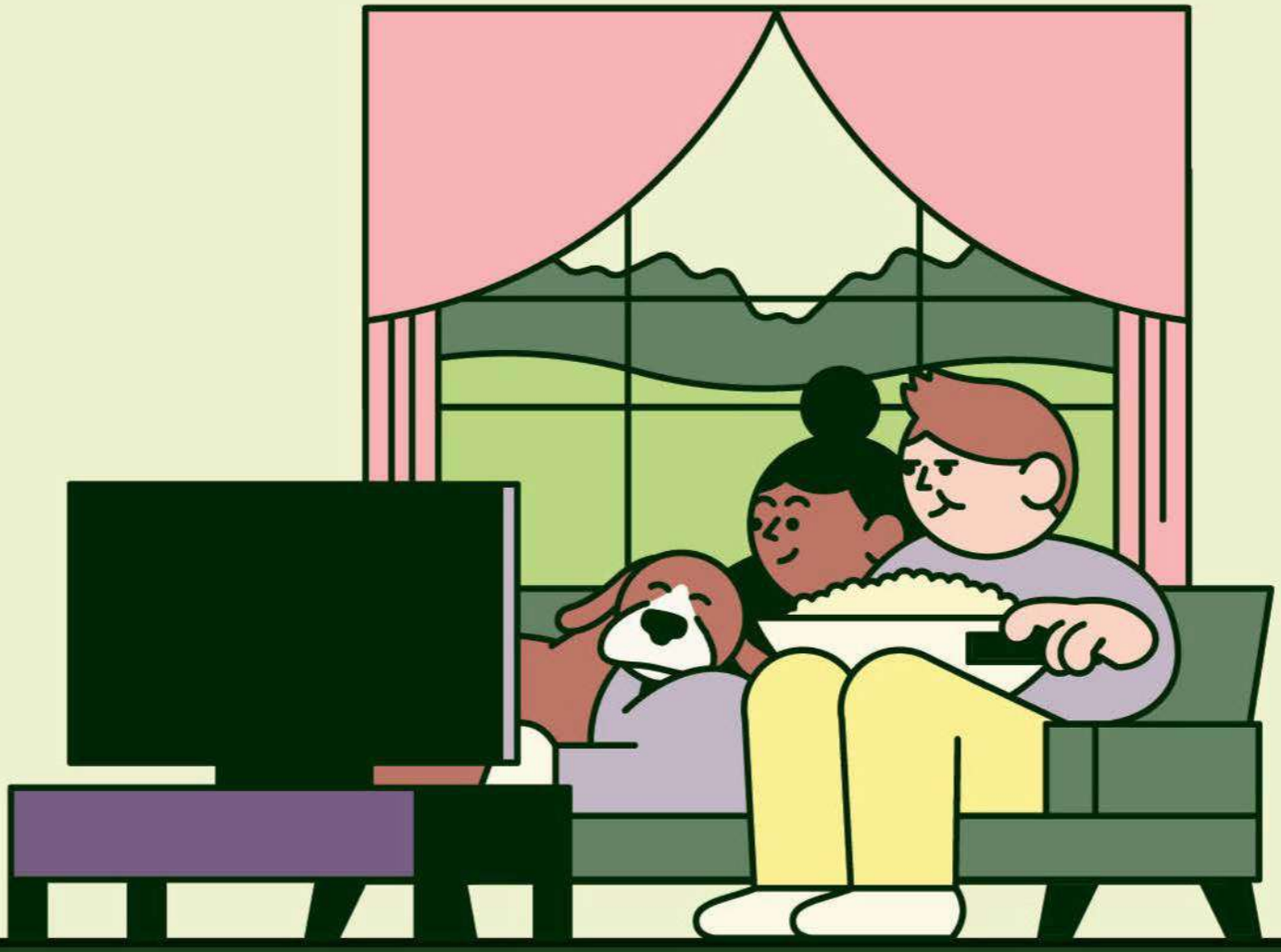

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